

IMPACT

making space work



SEATING IS BELIEVING

How chairs are becoming more flexible to meet worker and workplace needs.

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Ever go office chair testing? The untrained eye tends to favor the standard upholstered task chair with heavy padding, adjustable arm rests and lumbar support. This choice can seem much more appealing — and forgiving of imperfect posture — than the über-modern, ergonomically correct chair that makes you feel like Dr. Claw from *Inspector Gadget*.

With workers spending more time in the office and longer hours in their chairs, the design community is finding that ergonomics and aesthetics do not have to be mutually exclusive. New chair designs respond to the many ways people work, move and sit, and are available in one-size-fits-most, and sit-any-way-you-like concepts that offer full support to workers — no matter what their posture preference.

“Task chairs are now much more intuitive. They encourage or respond to movement of the individuals, where as most traditional chairs are hard and fixed,” says Sean Wayne, director of interior design for Hickok Cole Architects in Washington, D.C.

This intuitiveness makes a chair much more than office furniture on wheels. With designs that are all at once sustainable, durable, flexible, aesthetically pleasing and reasonably priced, a task chair can now be a key factor in promoting an environmentally conscious culture or contributing to the health and wellness of employees.

Task at hand

Advancements in technology (including computer faxing, e-mailing and instant messaging) have workers chained to their desks with less of an excuse to get up and move around. Over the past 10 years, this has led to trends in office design that emphasize ergonomics and just plain getting people up, moving and collaborating.

“Ninety percent of office workers spend more than four hours a day sitting at their computer. Aside from a person’s bed, the



Click above to view chair designs introduced in 2009 that are design-driven, flexible and ergonomic.

chair is the second most commonly utilized piece of furniture,” Wayne says. “As a result, task chairs do not just accommodate a fixed desk solution, rather they support multiple activities and different work styles, including how a worker sits while at his or her workspace — whether a worker likes to straddle the chair, lean backward, sit sideways or slouch.”

With today’s emphasis on worker comfort and healthy workplaces, interior designers have been challenged to find chairs that fit the ergonomic and budgetary needs of a client

as well as the design vision of the office space, says Stanley Felderman, co-owner of FKA Design in Los Angeles.

“We as designers need to learn to push ourselves,” Felderman says. “We can get complacent with what we have liked before. But instead, we need to push ourselves to rethink — come from a different point of view. We need to constantly engage the new and re-evaluate our own aesthetic preference.”

This will often mean that chairs are breaking designers out of their categorical molds of traditional, contemporary, transitional and modern office designs. They need to focus as much on the people using the chairs as they focus on how the chair complements a motif.

“When companies do not include seating in creating a new space or refurbishing an existing one, they are stopping too short,” Felderman says. “I would rather cut other parts of my budget than eliminate new task seating in a project. I have been known to cut out elements that enhance a design, but don’t oblige to the health and comfort of the employee.”

All rolled into one

Greg Broaddus, chief financial officer of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a public policy think tank based in Washington, D.C., is looking for durability and lasting designs so CSIS can uphold its cohesive design aesthetic as departments grow, furniture wears and personal preference evolves.

“We want attractive office furniture that will facilitate our mission of research,” Broaddus says. “We are searching for office furniture that can be flexible to adapt to our growing departments and, in particular, chairs that are ergonomic and sustainable.”

Broaddus plans to have a variety of seating based on whether the chair is located in a private office or a collaborative area, and he has been happy to find in his chair research that he will not have to sacrifice ergonomics to fulfill his interest in purchasing sustainable furniture.

While CSIS plans to find a multi-part solution to employee seating, Watermark Credit Union in Seattle, Wash., was on the hunt for one single chair that could be a perfect fit for anyone who sat in it, in a design that would stay current throughout changing trends in office furniture. Both wanted to avoid the hodgepodge of furniture they ended up with by either accommodating different worker requests or by replacing some chairs and not others over the years.

“As we grew in our old space, we solved interior design issues on a case-by-case basis, without a strategy for future growth,” says Sabrina Rogers, vice president of human resources for Watermark Credit Union. “Now we have developed a cost-effective strategy with projections for the next 15 to 20 years. Our furniture has purpose and a solution for multiple scenarios.”

After determining a few chair styles that fit both the aesthetic and ergonomic requirements, Watermark Credit Union had a team of employees test them and provide input. The winner was a black mesh task chair that required little maintenance and was designed to fit the needs of at least 95 percent of the working population.

Personal touch

Throughout the chair-picking process, Rogers and her team learned how personal seating is to employees. Many employees liked the way seating was treated in a customized way in the past, and Rogers and her staff were concerned employees would not appreciate the company moving from a variety of chairs to only using one style.

“If we just put the chairs on the floor, it would not have been a smooth transition,” Rogers says. “We had chair consultants, chair doctors, come in and check in with employees to show them the different features of the chair and

how to use them. It was not about just plugging a chair in and making it standard. We also had to make sure the chair personally fit and met with the needs of each employee.”

Jeffrey Gay, a senior associate for IA Interior Architects in the Washington, D.C., office agrees. When considering a chair for a client, Gay looks at the lumbar support for a worker’s back; how the arm rests work and if they are simple to use; and if the chair legs would get in the way. Where aesthetics may come first in the chair-selection process, ergonomics and employee comfort is always the most important feature in the final decision, Gay says.

“It is no longer just about the chair,” Gay says. “It is about wellness, support, liability and, ultimately, making employees happy.”

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