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## Future Furniture Trends

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George Burns once said "Look to the future, because that's where you'll spend the rest of your life". For millions of people in the corporate workforce, this sentiment couldn't be more true. The furniture products that most of us come into contact with on a daily basis have shaped our behaviors and work styles over the last five decades. High panel workstations have even suffered their own fame in popular culture, being the prime example of what is wrong with corporate America—implying everything from the enforced regularity among workers to the analogy of working in a rat maze for nameless, faceless management. But things have been rapidly changing over the last two decades, and as we enter a new one, even more changes to commercial furniture design are occurring to respond to drastic changes in the corporate landscape.

We have already seen companies flattening out their hierarchies and incorporating increased collaboration into their respective cultures. Sustainability and best practices for environmental design have made major headway in our industry, as have ergonomics and concern for the worker's well-being. These changes made major breakthroughs in the 90s and the last decade, and continue to drive workplace and furniture design today. But where do we go from here? How will furniture design play a role in changing the future work styles of tomorrow? The first place we must look is at our socio-economic climate and put design into its proper context of what is going on in our world in order to even register a glimpse of the future.

Today we have four generations working together in the workplace for the first time in history. We have people migrating all over the world and especially to cities looking for jobs and hoping for a better life. This is a huge demographic shift that has already impacted organizations and will continue to do so as our world becomes more fluid and yet more saturated with workers, all of varying ages and cultural backgrounds. We have more tremendous technology capabilities than ever before, which has now allowed for workers to become untethered from their desks. We have changes in how companies perceive space; no longer a luxury, space has lost some of its traditional meaning when faced with rising costs of real estate and management of facilities. And of course we have sustainability, which is forcing

everyone to reevaluate how they do business as well as how to design and model their business.

All of these are drivers of change in today's workplace, and all of these factors are shaping how furniture manufacturers are designing for both the products of today, and the products of tomorrow. The most current furniture manufacturers are those who are looking carefully at these factors and studying how they will evolve over time, affecting how the worker will interact with furniture of the future. With that in mind, we are seeing furniture products that speak to human factors (behavior, preferences, comfort); space constraints and shifts in how people use space (interior architecture); technology integration and portability; and sustainability. All this while industrial designers search for new materials that will integrate the above factors and create long-lasting products of value. This is the order of the day, and this will be the order of the future as we know it, keeping in mind that these factors will experience tremendous change—especially in the arenas of technology and sustainability.

Let's look at these factors a bit more closely, in order to put them in context of workplace design:

### **Human Factors (i.e. People)**

With the multi-generations in the workplace, there is a broader range of work styles now. Traditionalists still put weight on the notion of the value of the private office, while Gen Y workers wouldn't be caught dead in a private office and prefer to collaborate face-to-face. The greatest challenge for companies is to get all four generations (Boomers and Gen X'ers included) blending into a cohesive workforce, one where sharing stories and knowledge is good for company business.

This social interaction is a huge driver of change in the workplace and thus furniture design, for companies need furniture that can accommodate teaming and project collaboration while still providing opportunity for heads-down work. John Hellwig, vice president of design and innovation at Teknion, believes that "we are social animals and this will always ensure the need for face to face meetings, working together, and the very existence of the office as an idea. Even as the internet became a way of life, being connected by a web can go only so far. The interactions, politics, grouping and shifting of people is a rich source of ideas and satisfaction for most of us. It is this collaboration (teamwork, collective intelligence, cooperation) that is the essence of work and creativity. □



Teknion's new dna line of collaborative seating and tables in cluster formation



There is also a big push for products to become more personalized to the user's preferences. Task chairs have been doing this for some time, but now we are seeing this applied to a broader level of workstation products that address the individual's needs and comforts, whether they are physical or psychological. At the same time, these products are designed to be more agile and intuitive for the user and less cumbersome. And with the growing diverse population, one size does not fit all. Workers want a more personalized experience at the office, of course tied to the different generational needs as it is to technology.

Jan Johnson, vice president of design and workplace resources at

## Knoll's Generation Chair - Sit How You Want

Allsteel, has this to say regarding what she is looking at for future products: "Things that support not just the individual at work, but the group at work, socializing and relaxing. We're working out how best to support that with products that are more accessible, versatile, and human—that is to say, more intuitive, familiar, comfortable, tactile, and less institutional, and designed to let the user find their own posture, their own way of using that object to suit their needs and preferences."

## Interior Architecture

With the rising cost of real estate and space being a premium, companies have long been downsizing to make the most efficient use of their business. And with workers demanding more face time in collaboration and social interaction, the walls (and panels) are coming down. This isn't really new, but this will continue to drive future business and thus furniture design. Products must support varying work settings for focused work, shared work, and socializing. Floor plans will reflect this, with more real estate dedicated to shared spaces and less for dedicated workers (i.e. individual workstations and offices).

Flexibility, mobility, and agility will be key for future furniture, as items will need to be configured as per the user requirements. Again, one size no longer fits all, and one workstation type will no longer apply for the majority of workers as a prescriptive approach. We will continue to see the heavy reliance on movable walls and modular raised floors, for these especially support complete flexibility. Furniture will need to interface more gracefully with these types of items and integrate not just as loose furnishings, but become seamless with the interior architecture.



Allsteel's Stride, breaking down the cube



Teknion's Optos integrates with the building and allows for future changes

This Spring Knoll will introduce antenna® workspace, designed by Masamichi Udagawa and Sigi Moeslinger, which addresses furniture intended to design spaces. Benjamin Pardo, Knoll's design director, explains: "Knoll has a history in the orchestration of spaces, not just the sculptural object. Antenna is new way of shaping space for a range of work modes—focus, share, team—with a deceptively simple collection of desks, tables, storage units and screens that can be combined and recombined in a seemingly infinite number of ways. Everyone else is building products. We are building spaces. Knoll and antenna are very much aligned in our views of design as a tool for social interaction, a way of bridging people and technology."

Taking this a step further, Jeff Reuschel, global design director for Haworth, believes that the practice of interior design, not just furniture design, will also need to change its approach: "I think the more impactful area of interest is at the boundary between furniture and the interior architecture. Currently furniture is factory-built and interior elements are largely site-constructed by craftspeople. Site-built and craft-constructed in turn means non-adaptable and immovable. This is an unsustainable practice. Interiors will go through the same transformation that furniture has in terms of flexibility and

mutability."

## Technology

This is the hardest area to predict, with changes happening at lightning speed. But we are headed in the direction of freedom—freedom to work in any setting, anywhere (whether that is in the office, home, or other place). Devices are getting smaller, wires for data are going away (with wires for power the next challenge), and every device can now be mobile. No longer do workers need to be tied to a specific desk in a specific location. We can only imagine the implications of this in the future.

Currently, technology is being integrated into furniture but with limits, as technology changes so fast and it's easy to become quickly obsolete. One example of technology integration is a new device called Powermat, which was unveiled at Neocon in 2009 and won Best of Show for its innovative approach to handling wireless power. As a device it can be placed invisibly in worksurfaces to create zones where devices (laptops, cell phones, ipods) can receive power just from sitting on the desktop. Teknion has been experimenting with Powermat, showing it embedded in their products, and they will continue to do so for Neocon 2010.



Steelcase's media:scape, integrating technology and collaboration

Allsteel, too, is looking to make their products integrate with technology. Jan Johnson explains: "We are trying to make sure our products, to borrow a tech term, are interoperable with technology — they play nicely together — without embedding the technology and obsolescing the component once the technology is obsolete".

Mark Schurman, director of corporate communications at Herman Miller, adds: "Customers can also anticipate greater integration or embedding of technologies within the furniture and other place-making interior elements, offering convenience, energy and data management, and generally greater value to the individual and organization".

Steelcase introduced media:scape two years ago as an example of a product that addresses technology integration but also worker behaviors. Brett Kinkaid, director of design for Steelcase's North American Studio, explains: "media:scape is a great example of a product that addresses these insights and challenges. It was more than the observation that people were spending time swapping cables in meetings that lead to this innovative idea. We understood, also, that the nature and expectation of how people work together is changing. Companies need to tackle problems that are far more complex than one person can handle. For this to happen they need to empower small teams to connect in more intuitive and democratic ways. It is understanding both this business trend and the physical/social characteristics of small groups that make media:scape insightful. In the future we believe that products that lack insight will also lack relevance."

## Sustainability

Currently LEED is the benchmark for sustainable design projects, but the future will demand thinking beyond LEED as products will need to be designed with less environmental impact. Like technology, this is a rapidly expanding area that we can only guess at what new thinking and processes will emerge,

especially in the realm of low-impact material science. However, manufacturers will move beyond material considerations (such as recycled content and low VOCs) into a more holistic and thoughtful approach that encompasses life cycle assessment and non-obsolescence. At Knoll, for example, they focus on three elements of sustainability: climate change, third party certification, and an environmental response to materials, products, and processes. More consolidated, transparent certification systems are making headway, such as SMART for materials and furniture, and Level by BIFMA, which addresses furniture solely.

From a materials standpoint, advances in synthetic or man-made technology will give industrial designers new advanced materials that will solve age-old dilemmas, while providing excellent performance and environmental criteria. Jan Johnson at Allsteel believes that this will balance out with a desire for more natural, authentic, and simple materials, while Jeff Reuschel at Haworth thinks that materials will have less importance as products are increasingly designed to be reused. Benjamin Pardo of Knoll adds: "This is an era beginning to come to grips with conserving natural resources, and our new products' innovative use of materials and elimination of extraneous parts is part of a growing embrace of sustainable design. □

To conclude, all of these factors are converging to create the most dynamic and challenging furniture industry that anyone has seen to date. In order to create meaningful products that fulfill requirements of today's and future workforce, manufacturers need to fully understand these factors in context while keeping pace with today's corporate businesses. And as we have learned, this model isn't the only one that works. Colleges and universities, as well as libraries, have also embraced similar thinking although in a different context. But the goal is the same □ to provide settings for people to be their best and do their best.

Also, solutions will no longer be found in one sole product. A hybrid of furniture products will be required to achieve the complex goals of today's market segments and individual workers. Just as ideas converge, so will products and they will need to integrate seamlessly with each other.

Brett Kinkaid of Steelcase has this to say which sums things up: "When we think about the future of commercial furniture, we are really thinking about the future of business. We know that the pace of work and the complexity of business increase every year and we believe this will be true across the foreseeable future. We also believe that the companies that survive and thrive will be leveraging their space, furniture and technology strategically to give employees a competitive advantage. It is really, then, at the intersection of changes in technology, changes in the social nature of work and the globalization of business where we see the future of furniture."

- Royce Epstein, Sr. Resource Specialist, Kling Stubbins and Founder/Editor of blog [Repeat. No Repeat.](#)

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