

A quest for the comfiest seat

NeoCon highlights efforts to improve office chair design mixing science, art

By MARY ELLEN PODMOLIK
Tribune reporter

At most trade shows, attendees spend hours walking the exhibit hall floors in search of the products and services that'll best serve them.

At last week's NeoCon show highlighting the latest in commercial interior design, many of the 40,000-plus attendees spent time sitting, in search of the best seat for their seat.

Based on the myriad chair designs displayed at the Merchandise Mart show, the quest for a truly comfortable office chair continues in earnest, both by consumers and the industrial designers, anthropologists, psychologists and manufacturers who spend years bringing a chair to market.

It's not an easy task, experts say, and involves millions of dollars, starting with extensive research into kinesiology, or the way in which people move.

There are also the realities of people themselves to deal with: Some are petite, and more are becoming morbidly obese. Some sit on the edge of their seats when they work, and others lean back. And most workers, ergonomics experts agree, sit too much.

"If you sit in the wrong posture, for too long a period, no chair in the world is going to help you," said Cindy Roth, president of Ergonomic Technologies Corp.

"It's up to the employee to realize when their body is beginning to talk and when it is screaming at you. The human body was not meant to sit for two to three hours at a time."

The good news: There's a chair for everyone.

The bad news: The best chair may be cost-prohibitive, and because companies order chairs in bulk, what may be one cubicle denizen's dream seat may feel like a torture device to a co-worker.

"A chair is the most intimate piece of furniture you'll ever own," said Mark Schurman, a spokesman at Herman Miller Inc.



MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Attendees at last week's NeoCon commercial furniture convention in Chicago test Herman Miller's new Sayl task chair, which sells for about \$400.

"(Comfort) is just really tough to get right. It's really tricky to find the natural motion. It's the art and the science, and the challenge is to get both right."

Chair-makers keep at it because comfort is tied to productivity and, eventually, health issues. In a survey released this year, Staples Inc.'s corporate division found that almost half of people gave the comfort of their office chair a grade of "C" or lower, and more than half said if they could do one thing to improve their workplace, it would be to ask for a better chair.

"It sounds like B.S., but if you're not comfortable, all you want to do is leave," said longtime industrial designer David Jenkins.

The latest chair trends borrow not only from European design but also from the home. The result are chairs with cleaner, simpler lines that have a more residential feel to them.

And they can carry high price

tags. This month Haworth announced a partnership with Crate & Barrel to begin selling a scaled-down version of its Very Task chair in stores in August for \$999.

Technically, designers take one of two paths as they fashion a chair that's durable, comfortable and moves the way its inhabitants do. Chairs that rely on active ergonomics have moving parts that a user can adjust, after referring to instruction books and even online videos, to personal preferences. Those that rely on passive ergonomics have the support features built into the chairs.

Herman Miller, which has sold more than 6 million of its Aeron chairs since the 1995 introduction (God sits in one in a 2005 episode of "The Simpsons"), showcased at NeoCon a chair modeled on the suspension design principles used in San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. The molded back of the \$399 Sayl is stretched in such a

way that it provides various levels of support in different sections.

There are more chairs that cater to eco-shoppers, ones that are made of recycled content and are recyclable.

There also are more chairs that cater to larger users. Some makers have increased the load-bearing weight of their chairs to as much as 350 pounds. Neutral Posture Inc. offers a chair for people that weigh 300 to 500 pounds.

Another eye-catching option, and one designed to curtail at least one bad habit, is incorporated in the Luce and Leopard chairs from Okamura Corp.

When empty, the chairs lean forward, so they absorb some of the impact as a person sits down. As a person leans forward to stand, the seat pitches forward again; that also means it's difficult to sit on the edge of the seat. The chairs are priced at \$730 to \$2,400 a piece.

Chair manufacturers say no chair is comfortable for hours on end, and that a combination of sitting and standing at work may produce the best result. Women, Roth said, need to stop crossing their legs, while men need to stop leaning back so far, putting one leg over the other and balancing a keyboard on their legs. She also always recommends a chair with arms.

When it comes to testing a chair, don't sit and stand, companies advise. Just sit.

"A quick sit may be the worst test you can do," said Tom DeBoer, a Haworth product manager. "A lot of times the ones that are comfortable initially may not be comfortable all day long."

Herman Miller's Schurman agrees: "It's a little bit like buying a bed. Spend an hour."

mepodmolik@tribune.com
Twitter @mepodmolik