

Trends in Office Furnishings



By Wendy Smith

The economy affects us in all aspects of our lives so it should come as no surprise that it also influences office trends. According to John Hedges, president of Desk Set Ltd., business needs drive trends, which in the current market means doing more with less. The general economy, an ongoing corporate budget crisis, and company downsizing has forced companies to re-address the cost of facilities and to drastically re-prioritize. Long gone are the 1980's where corporate image was reflected in palatial estates and impressive offices, meant to garner market share and attract workers. Company managers are now rethinking the concept of office space.

*The **Resolve**, based on a 120-degree angle, provides a more natural, open environment than the traditional cube.*

Each year, more and more companies are telecommuting or “hotelling” where workers reserve a general use cubicle to plug their laptops in for specific periods of time instead of having their own

workstation. Office furnishing manufacturers are responding to the 1990’s economic crunch and opting for simpler and lower price points. As the corporate crystal ball becomes more and more murky, with increased worker mobility and the questionable longevity of many ventures, companies are often unable and unwilling to make large long-term investments in furnishings.

For Steve Platner, vice president of Batty & Hoyt, although the economy is an important factor, ultimately the user is determinant in driving office requirements, which “depend on the needs of the end-user and how the employees work together in the office environment.” Two other factors, the customers’ technology needs and learning the specifics of the customers’ internal work dynamics, are equally significant according to Platner. So it makes sense that the first two questions he asks of his clients are:

- What are your specific needs?
- What is the budget you have for this project?

His customers are focused on finding furniture systems products that will best meet their electrical, communication, and configuration needs within a predetermined budget. Technology has revolutionized the old cubicle system where panels were primarily used for privacy and space delineation, but in many cases fell short in addressing the customers’ electrical and communication needs. Now, Platner says, a better alternative in many cases is the “frame and tile” system.

Responding to the need for increased flexibility and technology demands as well as enhanced aesthetics, this system employs an open frame, where you add on various tiles to create finished panels. The big advantage for the end user is these panels are three and one half inches thick as opposed to the two-inch thickness of the standard monolithic (one piece) panels, enabling more communication and electrical capacity per workstation. In addition, communication and electrical outlets can be accessed at multiple locations on the panel, providing greater ease of use.

A good option for the budget minded is a combination of both the monolithic panels and the frame and tile system.

A cable floor system, installed over an existing concrete floor can dramatically reduce cost and increase flexibility when workstations need to be changed.

The spine of the workstation cluster would be the frame and tile system, providing the communications and electrical power to the stations, and then non-powered monolithic panels are used for the other panels. Freestanding furniture can also be used in the workstation in lieu of “hang-on” work surfaces and shelves, to add additional flexibility. Another trend that Platner sees driven both by technology and the business need to reduce reconfiguration costs, is the “cable floor” system, which is a false floor installed over an existing concrete floor. This permits the communication and electrical wiring for the area to run beneath the furniture, dramatically reducing cost and increasing flexibility

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Feng Shui in the Workplace

Did you know there is a right way to position a CEO’s office in a building? Would you recognize the “power spot” within your own office? According to the principles of Feng Shui, an ancient Chinese philosophy, the relationship between humans and their environment is directly connected to their well-being and quite possibly, their success.

One negative aspect of an office is clutter, which can best be resolved through organization and incorporating accessories that touch on the five elements of Feng Shui—water, wood, fire, earth, and metal.

Some elements are considered better choices than others for an office. It is unwise, for example, to place glass furniture into an office, as it represents a lack of support. On the other hand, the flow of water from a fountain or sculpture represents the movement of money and opportunity. Stone and other heavy objects also create a sense of strength and stability.

Feng Shui solutions can correct a location and/or design problem and at the same time adjust a weak or missing area of the Ba-gua (areas that directly relate to one’s life experience). Feng Shui is believed by many to boost both mental and physical productivity and help obtain peace in the working environment whether it’s a home-based office or a large corporation.

Sandy Kyle, *Embellishments*

when workstations need to be changed. After a reconfiguration which requires a change in wiring, you simply remove the carpet tile and the two-foot square cable floor panel to access the cabling.

Perhaps the most revolutionary trend in office furnishings for John Hedges is encompassed in the "Pathways" product line launched by the manufacturer Steelcase Inc. Its innovation lies in expanding what the client thinks of as furniture and office space. This product finishes out a raw building complete with raised floor, drop ceiling, interior non-load bearing walls, phone, and data capabilities plus all the conventional furnishings of an office space. This is one stop shopping from a manufacturer looking to go beyond just furnishings to rethink the idea of usable potential office space.

Alexandra Maloney, director of design and general manager of Hurbson Business Interiors, also sees a trend away from the cubicle to a more open environment, focusing on mobility. As the exclusive Herman Miller dealer in Rochester, she sees its most innovative product addressing this trend to be "Resolve," designed by an industrial designer. Based on the 120-degree angle instead of the 90-degree angle, it provides a more natural, open environment using screens instead of panels, which you can personalize to your own needs.

She sees the job of her company as one of education, helping businesses understand the value her business can lend to a project as opposed to the client purchasing furnishings on his/her own. Although budgets are crucial, the bottom line is responding to the needs of the customer. The design history, background, and cutting edge approach of Herman Miller, who originated the frame and tile approach, make it one of Hurbson Business Interior's more popular choices.



Desk Set's refinished furniture looks and performs like new.

For all three companies, the trend to get more out of an overstretched budget means many clients are asking if they can adapt what they have by adding new products to what already exists. For Desk Set Ltd., which specializes in refurbished furniture, this is the focus. This company takes what already exists, either because the client has it or because Desk Set Ltd. has it in their warehouse, then refurbishes it with new fabric, parts, etc., and consequently redeploys the old with a blend of new. To put it in Hedge's words, "we take usable existing furniture and restore it to the look, feel, and performance of new for a price approximately half of what it would cost if purchased new." To that end, they re-laminate, reupholster, refinish, and repaint old furnishings and will buy, trade, refurbish, and deliver furnishings, as well as serve as a broker. In one instance, they swapped their client's partitions and converted conventional double pedestal desks into L-shaped workstations by taking them apart, cutting up the components, and resizing them to the workstation space plan, providing a very cost effective solution.

People in today's market want value—a combination of what looks good, does the job, and is affordable. We'd all like our offices to look and feel more like home, but can we afford it and meet our office needs too? We can if we shop carefully, ask the right questions, and work with a company that cares about our technical, aesthetic, and budget requirements. **BSM**