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Office furniture: Where design meets functionality

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SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

From health care to financial services, from biotech startups to centuries-old law firms, businesses of all sizes and in almost every industry share a common need: They all require office furniture for their employees.

The similarities may well stop there, however.

"Different companies have different priorities," says **Deborah Anderstrom**, a project director with **Fox Relocation Management Corp.** in Boston. "Everybody's thinking about function, but some may be more concerned about design than others. For others, it may be all about cost."

Not surprisingly, the office furniture industry offers businesses a host of choices to match those disparate tastes and priorities. From national chains to local dealers, businesses also have options for buying, leasing or even renting office furniture.

Given the array of choices, many businesses benefit from outside help in planning and selecting office furniture, says **Steve McMahon**, director of contract furniture at Framingham-based **Staples Inc.** Those consultants can also help a business create office furniture standards, which can be important as a business grows to multiple offices or

branches.

"A business might have an office in Boston and multiple regional locations and they want the same look and feel," says McMahon. "It provides a growth platform for those businesses that are opening 10 offices — it makes it that much easier to meet deadlines because you don't have to reinvent the plan each time."

Beyond ensuring furniture sets the right tone and is functional, a well-designed office also can add to the well-being of workers, but businesses don't necessarily need to overspend on that front.

When concerns about how furniture design affected health issues such as carpal tunnel syndrome, many businesses invested heavily in ergonomically designed furniture and accessories such as special chairs and keyboard trays, only to find many employees didn't want them, says Anderstrom. "You need to provide access to it, but most companies don't need to invest to equip everybody with those items." Office furniture can vary widely in pricing, from high-end designer furniture that offers style as well as function to



Patrick: Map out a space plan

HAVE A SEAT

- Many businesses use consultants for planning and selecting office furniture.
- Ask yourself: Will this furniture last and will it lead to worker productivity and happiness?
- Find a dealer you can trust. A dealer brought early into the furniture-selection process adds a lot of value.

basic furnishings.

The initial purchase cost may not tell the whole story, however, and a key consideration is total cost of ownership, says McMahon, including how long products will last and the impact of selected furniture on productivity and worker happiness.

How a business operates now and in the future almost must be taken into consideration. "There is a tremendous amount of activity around the whole work-at-home idea, and that bleeds into the entire furniture program," says McMahon. A business that has 20 sales professionals, for instance, might only need five workstations because those workers spend the bulk of the time outside the office.

"A company needs to map out its

head count and space plan," says **Ken Patrick**, president of **Environments at Work**, a Boston-based office furniture dealership.

A business that has been using the same fixtures for a while or hasn't purchased office equipment in a while may also want to start getting up to speed with what's new in the industry, he adds. "The more you know, the better equipped you'll be to make a decision."

Finding a good dealer you trust can be worth the legwork, and a business may get more out of that relationship if it's forged early on in the process. "A good dealer can add a tremendous amount of value to the planning process if they are allowed to participate early enough," Patrick says.

Despite the hype about wireless technology and the ability to do desk-bound work almost anywhere, the traditional office isn't going away, says Anderstrom. Some businesses are building in areas where laptops can be brought to use a wireless network, but even companies that use laptops heavily use docking stations on traditional workstation-style desks or cubicle setups.

The extra space? Often, it's being taken up by a second or third display. "In this competitive world, everyone wants to get the information into that office environment faster," says McMahon.