

MIMQB

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hip,
smart,
chic.

the new OM5
by officemaster

M⁵ series
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hip appeal.
smart design.
chic seating.

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OM5 series
who says you
can't have it all

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Seating the Future

As an industry matures, it becomes less apparent how innovation will happen, especially when it comes to new seating. It seems like everything has been done before. Nothing new can come from a category that has been designed to death, can it? Yet if you ask the industry how seating can continue to evolve (and I did), no one will tell you the category is stale. Innovation continues to move the industry forward and seating, in many ways, is leading the way.



Ask Herman Miller how seating will evolve and they will tell you through the use of new materials. Ask Steelcase how seating will evolve and they will tell you it will happen by the careful study of how people work. Ask Humanscale how seating will evolve and they will tell you through simplicity of form and function.

Though the office furniture industry can appear stale sometimes, it is committed to pushing the limits, especially when it comes to seating. Much of the innovation in seating is being driven by changes in the way people work. Laptops, smart phones and tablet devices are pulling workers away from traditional workstations. That means seating makers need to design products that work at a desk, in a social setting or in a collaborative work area.

Products like Haworth's Very chair, Steelcase's Cobi and i2i, Herman Miller's Setu and Generation by Knoll all are chame-

leon-like chairs that can be used in a variety of settings.

Kimball Office is working on the changing needs of workers in the seating category by focusing on highly adaptable lounge seating. The company also has a close relationship with German seating company Interstuhl. Kimball's Keith Metcalf said the seating sector has not hit its peak. "I tend to think there's different turning points in our work culture," he said. "The different ways that we work demand different attributes in our seating. There are still a lot of things we can do with materials, technological achievements in manufacturing and other areas to improve seating. Our physical being is changing based on the way we work. At one time, a worker would have gone into an office, sat there all day and never moved around. Now you might work in a lobby area and a lounge area and at a desk. That sort of takes the ergonomic challenges into different zones of the office."



Kimball Office Mito

At the same time customers are demanding more from their seating products, they are demanding more for less money as well. "The industry has the opportunity to give the end users all that they want at a great value as well," said Phil San Gabriel, a seating product manager at Allseating.

"I think you can make a good ergonomic chair affordable to the masses with all the new materials available to us," he said. "We believe a great ergonomic chair can improve the human condition. But it has to feel good for your wallet as well. Also, we are seeing more people collaborating and sharing chairs. Here at Allseating, it's mass customization of how a user can tune the chair for their own comfort.

Regardless of how technology affects work, there will always be a need for seating products in an office, Metcalf said. "A lot of ergonomics goes into seating, but we also have to talk about ergonomic advances in tables and work surfaces," he said. "Those are necessary items as well. Adjustable work surfaces are definitely one way to achieve this, which allows a worker to sit or stand at work. The other way to improve ergonomics and help support seating advances is in accessory items that can be adjustable like monitor mounts. Instead of having a monitor sit on a desk and take up space, you can mount it to a track system or wall, which allows for adjustable height."

So innovating seating takes more than innovating the seat itself. The seat must work as part of a larger office system to truly help workers become more productive. The furniture must be able to work in a variety of areas as well. The days of site-specific furniture are, for the most part, over.

For example, Kimball's Mito (sold through its partnership with Interstuhl) can work in a wide variety of areas in an of-

fice, from a high-end executive setting to a collaborative area to a lounge setting. It is offered in multiple back height options, guest seating and convertible side chairs. The optional ottoman can be used to rest your feet or flipped up to create a work surface or lectern.

"I think we've advanced quite a bit (as an industry in terms of seating)," Metcalf said. "There's been a lot of new technology that has gone into mesh and fabrics that allow seating to be really fluid. Our understanding of ergonomics has changed as well. Ergonomics doesn't just deal with how a body works with a product, but how our senses respond to it as well."

San Gabriel said the industry also is advancing seating by responding to the needs of both an aging workforce and Generation Y. "As an industry, we are really in uncharted territory," he said.

The seating market is much like that for shoes. Shoes have been around as long as people started walking. And yet companies like Nike, Reebok and others continue to advance footwear by using new designs and materials. The same can be said for the office furniture and its advancements in seating.

"I don't think we're tapped out until every other industry is tapped out," he said. "It is just about being comfortable in a seated position, but that means different things to different people. For us it is back to mass customization. You give the customer the choice of four or five different arms on chair. You give them the ability to change the foam. You give them the ability to change the mechanism. We've learned that it is hard to get people to agree on the right theory of comfort. We want to give the choice to the customer." ¶

Functionality Made Simple

Manufacturers are challenged to develop ever more sophisticated – yet simple – ergonomic office chairs that meet demands for comfort, support, and style.



The workplace as we know it is undergoing a radical transformation. The workforce is becoming ever more physically diverse, the work we do is becoming ever more knowledge-intensive, and the expectations we have of our tools is becoming ever greater. We expect them to anticipate our needs and respond effortlessly – from the auto-correct in our word processors to the touch screens on our iPads. And our expectations don't stop when it comes to the chairs we sit in.

As we become more cognizant of ergonomics and its effects on the human body, we've come to realize that sitting is a dynamic activity, best addressed by a chair that recognizes our natural tendency to re-adjust throughout the day. As we continue to expect more for less, and demand even greater responsiveness, the contract seating market is challenged to

provide smarter and more attractive solutions for a range of workspace demands and environments.

Seating manufacturers must respond to these evolving demands by offering the most advanced ergonomics while meeting critical market demands for simplicity. A finely designed chair that can be adjusted for better health and support was yesterday's news. One that does so without the user's constant input is today's expectation. Some of the industry's top players have introduced advanced ergonomic chairs that rely on simplicity: Humanscale's World, Knoll's Generation, and even the Sayl and Embody from Herman Miller come to mind. But would it be possible for some of the industry's smaller, mid-market players to get in on the game? MMQB dug around, and was surprised to find out what's been developing under the radar.

Southern California-based Office Master has been modestly producing ergonomic, mid-priced seating for 25 years. Readers east of the Mississippi may not have heard of them, but with the introduction this year of the OM5 Series ergonomic chair, that should change. Poised to make a commanding splash, the OM5 Series represents the kind of innovative thinking and price-sensitive manufacturing know-how that reminds us there are still fresh ideas to be found in the mid-market seating arena.

“We started by looking at people and how they actually sit,” explains Office Master president Wallace Hwang. “We already knew that producing a well-functioning chair wasn’t rocket science. But using one was another matter. People either love all the controls and make adjustments throughout the day, or more commonly they neglect 90 percent of the chair’s ergonomic features and sit restricted by the chair’s last setting.”

Cue the OM5 Series. Following the axiom that simplicity is best, Office Master engaged multi-talented designer Francisco Romero of Phidesign to create a chair that was simple, chic, and most importantly, intuitive. Originally intending to pare this everyday but critical part of our working lives to its essential ingredients, Office Master’s design brief soon grew even more ambitious. Could Romero eliminate one of the most basic – but restricting – parts of any chair design: the control mechanism?

During a record-setting 18 month process, Romero and the Office Master engineering team conceived and manufactured an entirely new chair from the ground up.

“We knew that building a wholly functional yet truly simple chair was a significant challenge. One of those easier said than done things,” states Office Master’s Manager of Product Development John Bueno. “But we knew we had an opportunity to make something truly unique: doing away with the off-the-shelf controls that would limit our goal of building a chair that had few if any levers, yet didn’t lose the critical ability to respond to users.”

Much like its competition from the industry’s bigger players, the OM5 Series is specifically designed to address the

concerns of the contemporary workforce. As a self-regulating chair, it intuitively responds to a wide range of body weights, sizes, and sitting positions without the need for manual adjustment. Where it really departs from most chairs, though, is its incorporation of a patent-pending user-driven technology that enables the OM5 to learn from and adapt to its user. The design itself completely eliminates the need for complicated knobs and levers and brings simplicity back to the act of sitting. Office Master calls this technology “body-activated motion,” and it is a unique geometry that links the seat and back movement around an ergonomically positioned hip pivot point, resulting in a highly comfortable chair – whatever the user’s position.

“OM5 challenges previously held assumptions about what defines a good ergonomic chair,” explains Wilson Chow, Office Master’s Director of Marketing. “We had to overcome a strongly held perception that the more knobs, levers, and paddles there are, the more ‘ergonomic’ and ‘comfortable’ the chair would be. But why can’t we get everything we need from a chair without having to manually ‘command’ it? We’ve come to expect that responsiveness from computers and cars – the younger generations especially – why not expect it from our seating as well? It takes boldness to question this expectation, but we’ve already seen strong interest in the product, and know our timing with OM5 is right-on.”

Romero, who worked closely with Office Master’s internal design and engineering team, elaborates. “Being given the latitude to explore the ways that form and function could be seamlessly integrated allowed me to focus on interesting design questions: What makes something beautiful? And for me, the answer was simplicity – creating a new generation of seating where reason and beauty connected.”

The real beauty is the evolution of the ergonomic chair from a mechanism-dependent object to a truly simple, intuitive, and good looking chair. The movement toward simplicity is a trend we expect to continue, and we’re eager to see what solutions other manufacturers come up with. As our industry’s creative minds focus more and more attention on these design and engineering challenges, and look to other industries for inspiration, the ergonomic chair will no doubt continue to evolve. †



Office Master OM5