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Category Update: Time to collaborate & listen

[Michelle Sturman](#), 03 July 2018

The chameleon nature of the workplace is fuelling a buoyant office furniture market as the integration of ergonomics, technology and design becomes even more tightly-knit.



The role the workplace plays in the emergence of health and well-being trends continues to grow unabated, and office furniture is an essential part of this. The move to open plan, collaborative workspaces is driving the necessity for more innovative ergonomic designs that not only encourage movement, but improve overall levels of employee fitness and health.

As a result, the office furniture sector globally is generally reporting sales growth, as companies take advantage of changing office requirements. UK-based office furniture manufacturer Bisley, for example, reports year-on-year growth of over 10% in the UK and more than 7.5% in its international business. Meanwhile, for large manufacturers such as Steelcase, Herman Miller and Knoll, healthy financial results are leading to increased investment in product development and marketing as well as acquisitions.

In the past few months, Herman Miller and Steelcase have been on a spending spree, with the former expanding in Europe with [stakes in Maars Living Walls and HAY](#), and the latter broadening its portfolio in the education sector with the [acquisition of Texas-based Smith System Manufacturing Company](#). Steelcase has also entered into a [partnership with furniture lifestyle brand West Elm](#) to create workplace solutions.

Additionally, Fellowes Brands – a relative newcomer to the world of furniture – [bought workplace wellness solutions company ESI](#), and last year entered into a [joint venture with furniture specialist Posturite](#) (see the [interview with Fellowes' James Webb below](#)). So there's clearly plenty of action in the industry.

However, it's not been plain sailing for everyone. MooreCo Director of Marketing Paola Moore told OPI that US transactional office furniture sales have declined, citing reasons such as the uncertainty surrounding US wholesalers Essendant and SP Richards, as well as Amazon and overseas manufacturers selling directly into the market. In the UK, Floortex Europe Marketing Manager John Barker says the OP channel had been challenging, but is now picking up again after a slight dip in 2017.

Workplace challenges

The big trends pushing furniture sales are health and wellness, including ergonomics, the shift away from the grey cubicle into collaborative workspaces, and the move towards the 'office as a home'. "Consumers have veered to more of a residential feel; the office today is more like a home office, with cool fabrics, modern designs and comfort above all," explains Moore.

Wilkhahn Head of International Communications Burkhard Remmers explains that customers are facing three core challenges: how to attract talent, how to support collaboration, and how to make sure employees stay healthy. "Our answer is excellent and unique design quality, and dynamic, participation-oriented settings for innovation processes with furniture as a tool to increase physical activity," he comments.

A visit to any furniture show such as NeoCon in the US (see NeoCon Celebrations below) or Clerkenwell Design Week in the UK reveals these trends are in full swing. They are also creating some interesting office furniture adaptations. As Bisley Director of Sales – Key Account Division Geoff Lea remarks: "Agile working entails workers carrying laptops/tablets in their bags, and these high-value items need to be stored in a safe and secure way. The use of a locker or pedestal keeps an employee connected to the workplace, creating an essential 'sense of belonging'."

Bisley recognises that while it currently maintains its high market share, it operates in a declining sector and therefore innovation is vital. As Lea explains, storage products can provide perch-points for impromptu meetings, as well as doubling up as space dividers in an open plan environment. They can even provide acoustic qualities if constructed in the right fabric. "For Bisley, the key change is the increased need for personal storage and we are seeing a shift in buying priorities – storage is now considered a key element of office design. We are moving from supplying only the storage element in an office to providing a complete interiors solution for customers," adds Lea.

This fits with changes recognised by Steelcase, which sees less desire for personal pedestals; large fixed storage areas are also less prevalent. Indeed, the swing towards the gig economy and hot-desking has meant employees have become more agile. Now they require mobile technologies that they carry with them and an office that offers an ecosystem of spaces to support different types of work.

Tech focus

The demand for different ways of working is giving rise to the integration of technology in all aspects of the workplace. Ergonomic furniture vendor Humanscale believes furniture which is interconnected with IT solves many problems that users face with agile working, and that this is an area that will develop further. "Technology and connectivity are key areas for us. Moving forward, products such as M-Connect will increase in popularity due to their unique nature. We need to integrate furniture with tech, which enables us to engage with IT departments too," says the company's Senior Account Manager Alex Corbitt.

The amalgamation of mobile working, ergonomics, furniture and technology is also providing inspiration for traditional OP companies. Germany's Durable, for instance, has released a new tablet holder that is ergonomically designed, with adjustable screen angles and built-in security measures.

Staying active

The rise of the 'active office' is also aiding sales of products such as anti-fatigue mats, and of course, sit-stand desks and ergonomic furniture. As Floortex's Barker notes, the US is well ahead of much of Europe in these practices, although the Scandinavians have been working this way for decades.

Floortex is set to launch its second-generation range of anti-fatigue standing surfaces specifically focused for use with standing and height-adjustable desks. According to the company, the AFS-TEX 5000 offers the "ultimate ergonomic standing surface to promote comfort, reduce fatigue and increase productivity".

Products such as these mats are also helping to push the 'solution' idea mentioned by Lea. "By offering greatly beneficial accessories in a high-growth category, we are providing added value link-sell opportunities. We have seen significant success working with furniture resellers by encouraging add-ons," says Barker.

Moore agrees, adding: "Resellers should sell solutions and applications of furniture, not just the product itself. Both MooreCo contract and Vanerum North America strive to 'design with purpose' to create solutions that are personal and significant to the implementation that they are needed for."

For workplaces that have not yet evolved into fully collaborative spaces, there is still plenty of scope to provide a solution in the form of breakout areas incorporating modular furniture, for example.

UK-based office furniture manufacturer Dams says that the concept of the breakout area has evolved to become much more than just some soft seating hidden away in the corner of an office. A well-designed space can provide an informal meeting space, double up as a breakroom or, importantly, as a place for employees to relax away from their desk.

To this end, Dams has introduced Social Spaces – contemporary, design-led products for corporate breakout spaces, reception areas, meeting rooms and dining areas. The range comprises soft seating, multifunctional modular seating, table and bench combinations, and bistro-style chairs.

All well & good

Over the past few years, Fellowes Brands has taken the bold step to broaden its product range and make the leap into the growing area of ergonomics. OPI speaks to European Marketing and International Key Account Director James Webb to find out more.

OPI: How has the office furniture category performed for Fellowes over the past year or so?

James Webb: The [European] office furniture market is worth €8.4 billion (\$9.7 billion) and projections are that it will continue to grow. While this growth is very fragmented, depending on the market, the trends are broadly the same.

We have seen the development of innovative products that complement newer ways of working gaining momentum. In comparison to some of the other players, Fellowes is relatively new to the category. Despite this, we are seeing high levels of growth that we attribute to our approach of helping customers be the best they can be – whether at work or at home. For us, this is not just a brand positioning statement. It's something we all believe in and actively promote.

In general, the office furniture sector itself is seeing more businesses implement ergonomics and well-being solutions proactively to retain and attract talent. It is a positive cultural shift and we believe this is set to continue.

OPI: What are the major trends in the workplace furniture space?

JW: There are numerous trends dominating the workplace furniture space, but in particular they revolve around those product designs that contribute to productivity, collaborative workspaces and agile working. Products such as sit-stand workstations and desks are performing well as they address the growing need for healthier work environments.

The popularity of monitor arms is also on the increase because more people realise how dual screens can increase productivity by up to 42%. Hardware such as monitors have reduced in cost and this is facilitating new ways of working among end users as companies look to drive efficiency.

OPI: Conversely, are there any furniture trends which are falling out of favour with customers?

JW: Trends such as open plan offices are proving challenging for companies due to the acoustics issues these types of spaces generate. There is a requirement for employees to balance light and airy environments with privacy and collaborative working. Office furniture solutions will need to consider this and deliver accordingly.

OPI: Is Fellowes moving into any other new product categories?

JW: Yes. Following the growing popularity of the Fellowes Lotus range of sit-stand workstations that include the Lotus DX and Lotus VE, we will be building on our ergonomics focus and expertise. 2018 will see us expand the range with new products – the Lotus RT sit-stand workstation; Levado, which is a height-adjustable desk; and Penguin, an ambidextrous vertical mouse.

OPI: Are there specific verticals that stand out for you in terms of growth?

JW: We believe that growth will be driven by sectors employing knowledge-based and high-value workers, including verticals such as finance and IT. Although it is early days for us, we have created a significant number of tools that allow people to understand the benefits of implementing workplace health and well-being solutions, one of them being an ROI calculator available on the Fellowes website.

We are actively working with our resellers to offer consumers a free trial of our sit-stand workstations so that they can see the benefits for themselves. We are also having great success with running 'working well' days within large blue-chip companies in conjunction with our dealers, where we can share the benefits of employing a healthy workplace strategy with end users.

OPI: How is Fellowes incorporating technology into its office furniture designs?

JW: Consumers and businesses are always looking for office furniture that optimises existing space and allows workers to practise intuitive hot-desking.

Some of the technological integrations in the market include wireless charging and the futuristic ability of furniture to monitor inactivity and prompt movement, like fitness watches.

We know that when it comes to their work desks, consumers are looking for sharp structures with clean, crisp lines. They don't want to see unsightly wires and clutter. We're mindful of these requirements and our sit-stand workstations have built-in wireless charging and USB connectivity to offer a streamlined solution.

OPI: Fellowes recently acquired ESI and has partnered with Posturite. Can you provide an update on these deals?

JW: ESI serves the furniture dealer market, a different channel to Fellowes. While ESI sells specific Fellowes products to its clients, there is little overlap in our customer base and therefore the company will continue to do what it does best. Of course, we will pursue any efficiencies that may exist between us. Fellowes is also working with the ESI teams on several exciting product-related projects, which will be coming to market during 2019.

Posturite is a great business that has been very successful in its own right with a unique range of products and a highly-skilled team of ergonomic experts. We have a close relationship with them and are exploring ways in which we can benefit from each other's innovation and knowledge. As both companies continue to grow, we will also be looking to see how we can all operate more efficiently.

NeoCon celebrations

NeoCon, the furniture show for design professionals, celebrated its 50th year in style with cutting-edge displays and installations, events, expanded exhibition space, and parties galore, including 'The Future is PARTY', celebrating '50 years of tomorrow's design'.

This year saw more than 50,000 visitors stream through the doors of The Mart in Chicago, (IL), exploring the wares of 550 exhibitors across almost one million sq ft (100,00 sq m).

Setting the trends

The move to open plan offices and the 'living office' shows no signs of slowing, with furniture on display that wouldn't look out of place in a lounge, reception area or bar. Safco Products, for example, launched its MYAH Collection at the expo which is a range created to "Make Yourself At Home" – comfortable and versatile with a "home-style appeal to encourage collaborative environments for people to gather and work".

Curved modular furniture in all colours and fabrics was everywhere at NeoCon, with the latest models offering acoustic properties specifically aimed at collaborative spaces. In fact, acoustic offerings were widespread and included everything from a large variety of breakout spaces designed with privacy in mind, to living walls created to absorb sound.

Meanwhile, Herman Miller's acquisition, Maars Living Walls, unveiled AXES – steel-finish doors that pivot on axis points to become an acoustic wall system. Other notable trends that were very much in evidence were mid-century furniture designs and the incorporation of wood.

Health and well-being still dominates the commercial furniture scene, with ergonomic furniture and accessories in abundance – all with the aim of aiding a healthy workplace. This year saw desk chairs in particular moving towards intuitive movement. Steelcase, for example, touted its new SILQ chair designed to respond to the unique movement of the body, while Herman Miller launched the COSM chair.

The best in education

As usual, NeoCon brought together the brightest and the best in the industry for its world-class educational programme which comprised four marquee presentations and more than 100 seminars.

Standout seminars included a case study of the world's first WELL building; how to create a cult-like following through branding; moving beyond the open plan office; the gig economy; and using design psychology.

The keynote sessions featured a stellar line-up from influential names in design and elsewhere: Gensler founder Art Gensler in conversation with Cheryl Durst of the International Interior Design Association; *Interior Design* Editor-in-Chief Cindy Allen moderating a panel honouring all women in design; *Wired* Editor-in-Chief Nick Thompson on how technology and science will change our lives; and Ross Barney Architects founder Carol Ross Barney on creating liveable cities.

Tags: Clerkenwell Design Week, ergonomics, NeoCon, office furniture, well-being, WorkPlace Furnishings, Bisle, Fellowes, Floortex, Herman Miller, Humanscale, MooreCo, Safco, Steelcase, Wilkhahn

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