

# Beyond the water cooler

## Office furniture goes casual and comfy

BY DANIEL DROLET

Don't look now, but office furniture is getting a makeover. Driven by the increasingly collaborative and informal workstyles of the young, the increasing number of people working at home and the long hours people spend at their desks, office furniture is morphing into something that says as much about comfort as it does about function.

In the process, it's losing some of the look and feel of a traditional office.

Designers are also realizing they have to do something about the maze of computer cords that dangle from work spaces.

"One of the things we're seeing right now is that people are looking for comfort in their regular office," says Anika Nielsen, marketing manager for office products at CSN Stores, a Boston-based furniture retailer that plans to launch Canadian operations very shortly.

"People are there for long periods of time. They want it to feel like home."

"It's about creating an atmosphere where people are happy to come to work," says Jenny Harvey, communications manager at Coastal Contacts, a Vancouver-based company that sells eyecare products over the Internet.

With the idea of creating a bright and creative space that keeps people working in their call centre in an upbeat mood, Harvey is in the process of outfitting the Coastal Contacts office with furniture on a beach theme.

She's putting in a couch, a beanbag chair, vases, flowers "and things you'd have around the house" and tying it all together with a blue and orange colour theme that is Feng Shui-approved.

"As the job market in Canada becomes more desperate, companies are looking to their human resources departments and other means to keep employees happy — which is something a homey, comfortable office environment provides."

Harvey says it's been tough for her to find beach-themed office furniture.

Maybe. But it's not so difficult to find office furniture that is more relaxed, versatile and informal than the rigid wooden desks of old.

Toronto-based Teknion Corp. recently launched a new line called District that they're describing as "home sweet office."

"We're trying to make this not look like Dilbertville," says Steven Verbeek, director of design for Teknion, adding that as computers become smaller and more portable, it's getting easier to think of work stations as furniture.

"In fact, the District line was inspired by residential furniture. We're trying to draw from residential furniture to try to bring back some human qualities to office furniture."

That includes, in addition to functionality, having a low-slung desk extension double as extra seating by topping it with a removable cushion.

The move to combine comfort and functionality is also evident in home office furniture.

In May Herman Miller, a major international office furniture firm, introduced Lifework Portfolio, a line of five desks and multiple storage units designed for the home. The idea, the company said in a news release, is to create a hub for activities that include professional work and personal computing as well as more mundane

things like schoolwork.

"The desk has migrated to a variety of living spaces and has become the site of miscellaneous technologies, cords, and documents," the company explains.

"The Lifework Portfolio responds to the demand for functional and stylish contemporary work spaces that can harmonize with any area of the home."

Nielsen of CSN says people want that harmonization. They want the home office to match the rest of the house. The Herman Miller Lifework line, she says, "is bright and young and sharp — and also has comfort as its main point."

"The focus used to be on technology," says Verbeek, "and furniture was equipment. But I think clients are more sophisticated today and we're trying to respond to that."

One response evident in office furniture, whether for the home or a traditional office, is that it's getting smaller. Teknion says that the average employee work station has shrunk by 40 per cent in the last 15 years.

Office furniture is designed to last 25 or 30 years, says Verbeek, much longer than the technology it accommodates. So the best office furniture also has to be versatile, technology-neutral and designed to outlive whatever technology is the standard today.

And if you still have a nest of wires and extensions that curl at your feet — ask about "cord management." Some lines — the Herman Miller Lifework line among them — are working it into their designs.



Sleek, streamlined and contemporary, a new furniture line from Herman Miller brings casual comfort to the office.