

Wayne Lawson, manager of Copenhagen Business Interiors, remembers when offices were cubicles with high panels that completely hid workers from their outer environment. "I called it being down in the bottom of the well," he says. "You couldn't see, and the ventilation was lousy."



by Cynthia Scanlon
photography by
Loren Anderson

Offices in the twenty-first century will be fast-moving, changeable and technologically state-of-the-art. Speed and change will be the key factors influencing the future workplace with portable technology determining when and where many people will work.

To keep up with the trends of the future, many office furniture manufacturers are looking at what workers do, when they do it, and then adapt furniture and work spaces that accommodate those very individual needs.

According to Murray Goodman, president of Goodman's Furniture and Office Systems, Asia, North America and Europe are the leaders in office system trends, and they all approach those systems differently. "In North America, 65 percent of the offices use panel systems," he says.

But in Europe, Goodman says that "desking" is prevalent, whereby desks are connected to each other without necessarily having panels between them. Then a spine or core in the wall provides electronics. These desking units plug into each other and then plug into these walls.

"In Asia, they don't have panel systems at all," Goodman says. "Everything is one large open room where all the workers face their superiors."

In the future, Goodman sees the United States moving toward a blending of the three systems with an emphasis on the European style. "As we become very international in everything else we do, offices are

going to reflect that," he says.

According to Goodman, flexible, modular, dynamic, electronic, smart furniture is the trend with work stations having lower panels for more visual, audible and electronic communication.

Wayne Lawson, manager of Copenhagen Business Interiors, remembers when offices were cubicles with high panels that completely hid workers from their outer environment. "I called it being down in the bottom of the well," he says. "It was a claustrophobic closet. You couldn't see, and the ventilation was lousy."

Lawson represents a line of modular furniture by Teknion, a top-of-the-line furniture manufacturer which constructs their office modules with changeable and stackable side panels, the ability to hang shelving and bins off the module walls, magnetic lights that can be easily attached around the module, and electrical and wiring capability to accommodate fiber optics.

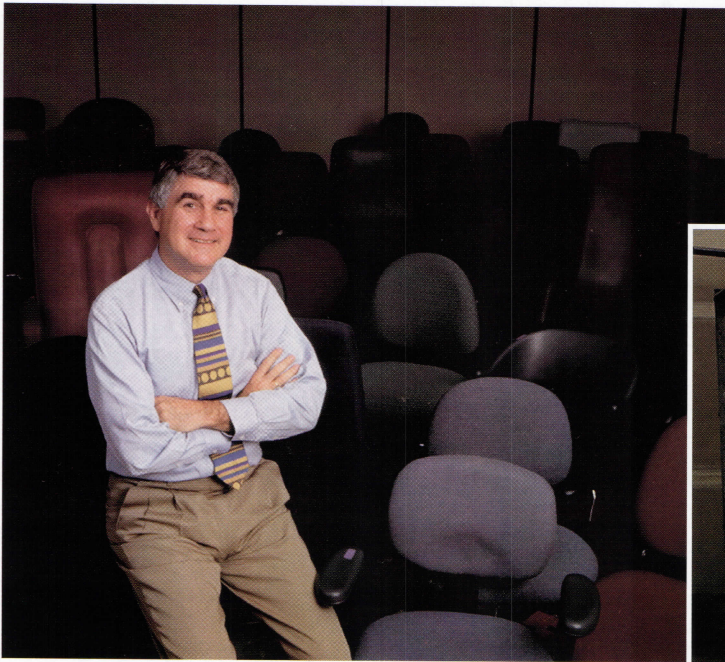
"Much of the present office furniture is not interchangeable and not easy to rearrange," Lawson says. "So businesses are constantly buying more product and realizing there's a lot higher cost to these products than they first thought."

According to Lawson, companies will change a typical office installation 10 times over 10 years. For an installation that can run between \$2,000 to \$8,000, that's money that comes right out of the company's bottom line.

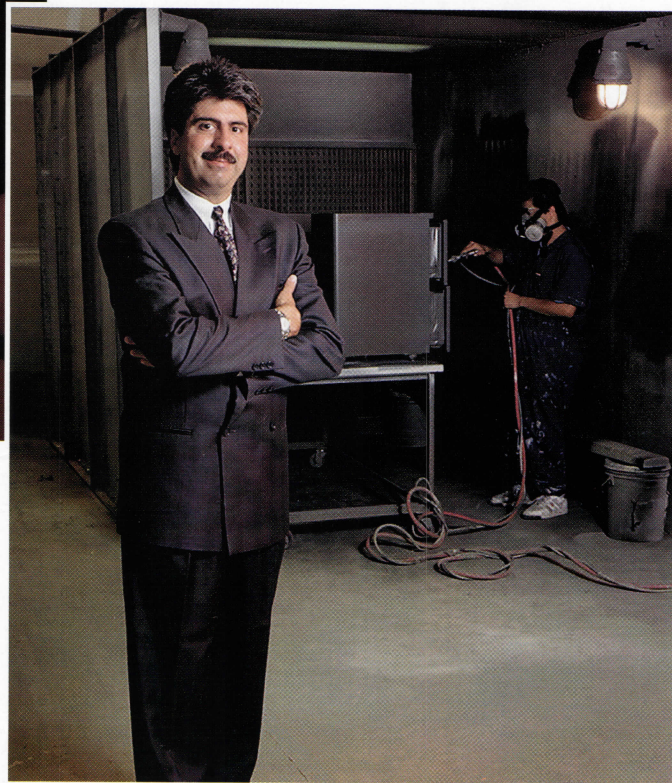
To combat some of these rising costs, Wayne Collignon, general

Office Systems,

"The office is now in your briefcase, your car, your home or on a plane," says Murray Goodman, president of Goodman's Furniture and Office Systems, who points out that technology has allowed many people to completely leave their traditional office behind.



Wayne Collignon, general manager of Reconditioned Systems, Inc., believes office workers must be able to move to be more productive. "They have to be able to reach for a drawer or an overhead and have adjustable chairs to vary their comfort throughout the day," he says.



manager of Reconditioned Systems, Inc. (RSI), says many large and small companies are purchasing used office furniture systems that have been reconditioned to look new at a reduced price.

"Even large companies are reviewing reconditioned products as a viable solution for their needs as opposed to buying new," he says. "The National Office Products Association said last year 8 percent of the total industry volume was reconditioned product. They expect it to be 25 percent by the year 2000."

Fiber optics will also be one of the big changes in offices of the future, according to Lawson. "We told clients 10 years ago they could put in a fax machine, and they asked, 'What's a fax machine?' It's the same with fiber optics."

He adds, "Few businesses are putting in fiber optics, but more offices are starting to get wired up. It's the thing they have to go to."

Teknion's office system has four-inch thick panels that can easily accommodate the fiber optic cabling, which cannot be bent and stored in other cramped paneling systems. "Fiber optics have to have a gentle radius," Lawson says. "It can't be bent like wire."

The concept of "teaming" will also affect workspaces of the future, according to David Petroff, vice president and director of design for Walsh Brothers. Petroff's company is a contract office furniture dealer that recently celebrated its 75-year anniversary in business.

"We're seeing a lot of teaming concepts in companies," says Petroff. "Through downsizing, re-engineering and what ever the buzzwords are

these days for trimming the workforce, they're forming groups now to complete tasks."

One recent example Petroff cites is a company that eliminated the walls between the front office and the production plant. You can walk right from the plant, 10 feet across the walkway, into the front offices. "We're seeing the barriers of the front office being torn down," he says.

Another major change that Goodman sees in office furniture will be ergonomics. Because people are different in their physical size, in the way they work, the hours they work, and the tasks they perform, Goodman says the government has mandated both federal and state regulations to make furniture more flexible and more human-factored. "Instead of people trying to adapt to the furniture, the furniture must ►

The Next Generation

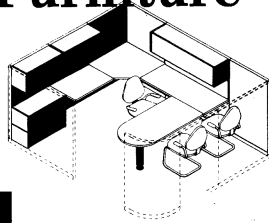
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adapt to the people," he says.

Tom Salem, president of Salem Associates, agrees with Goodman. "I spent three years in Europe, living and working," he says. "European seating is far superior to American seating. Europeans are constantly moving. They get up to answer their phone, and their chairs usually have one lever that makes all the adjustments for the body. American's chairs have so many levers they get confused."

RSI's Collignon also believes that office workers must be able to move throughout their day in their offices to be more productive. "If people don't move anything more than their fingertips in their work station, that's going to cause them to get sick," he says. "They have to be able to reach for a drawer or an overhead and have adjustable chairs to vary their comfort throughout the day."

For many office workers, who have completely left the office behind, working on the road or in their homes has become their new way of working. More than any other factor, telecommuting has had one of the greatest impacts on the workplace of today. It will continue to do so in the future. According to data compiled by LINK Resources, there are nearly 7 million telecommuters, people who work at least part-time at home during business hours. And an additional 9 million people use personal computers, modems and fax

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machines to do work after hours.

"The office is now in your briefcase, your car, your home or on a plane," Goodman says. "It's with you all the time. People realize they don't necessarily need to be next to the person they used to be next to."

Walsh Brothers' Petroff describes an innovative new concept in portable workspaces, "They're 'apartments' that will house about six people out on the production floor. You may have somebody from four different departments working in the same station, because they're assigned a project. When the

project is through they go back to their 'home base.' Then, when another project comes up, they're put into another one of these apartments that will house them temporarily."

All of this technological efficiency and portability does have a downside. People are more rushed and stressed, and more is required of them during a typical workday.

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"From a psychological standpoint, everything that has happened in the last decade to the office and office worker has hurt us all," says Lawson. "The amount of paper that computers churn out, what we have to deal with has caused our work to increase ten-fold."

Lawson says 20 years ago, he conducted interviews with people about what they do and how they do it in a relaxed and unhurried office atmosphere with five people doing a particular function without a computer. "Now I talk to one individual doing four times the amount of business with at least one computer helping them," he says. "And they are at the breaking point. There's a lot of unhappy folks out there in offices and the furniture has not caused it."

Goodman echoes Lawson's concern about the speed and stress of today's work environment. "The fax machine has changed the cycle of everything by the powers of ten," he says. "Before, everyone had a chance to think and plan. Now, there's no room to hide from a response or from what you're supposed to do. Some people are going to get run over by that."

Lawson adds, "I don't think furniture will completely fix some of the problems in the office. But when you give people the tools to do their job properly, and you give them a pleasing environment to do it in, where they are now spending 40 hours a week plus, then that will certainly help."

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Cynthia Scanlon is a writer and communications consultant based in Mesa.

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