



Seating plans

Today even the humble chair is not immune from having its carbon impact evaluated. FMs used to simply flick through a catalogue to choose their seating. Now it's a strategic decision as firms strive toward being seen to be greener-than-green. The issues for better furniture procurement are twofold. Furniture should be made from sustainable or recycled material, and can themselves be recycled at the end of its life.

The difficulty for buyers is that no exact definition of what constitutes a 'green' piece of furniture exists, says Richard Sanderson, managing director of Backbone Furniture, a consultancy that specifies, sources and procures for architects and interior designers. When a seller of furniture says that a desk or chair is their greenest item, there is no standard to measure the object against other desks on the market.

"There simply is no independent body to regulate the market," says Sanderson, who has seen green procurement rise from little interest when Backbone was formed to around 40 per cent of its business today.

Independent consultants may have their own evaluation system to evaluate the many different brands according to the consultant's own definition, as with Backbone's recently launched green guide. The guide considers loose furniture, workstations, desks and storage cabinets. The items are evaluated according to their content of recycled material, the toxicity of manufacturing process, how a factory is run according to energy and waste as well as packaging that surrounds the product when delivered to the client.

Basically, explains Sanderson, an independent consultant can offer supply chain information that will help their client's corporate social responsibility strategy. Firms with high CSR credentials avoid the use of hardwoods, especially mahogany and rosewood. Fortunately, other woods can be made to resemble them. Makers of steel furniture can be in a bind, says Sanderson. China continues to be a major buyer of all steel, including recycled types, to fuel its hectic industrialisation and building programmes. As a result, steel furniture makers can find it difficult to get recycled steel, which might be prohibitively expensive even if found.

Apart from CSR, pure commercial facts can make things like re-upholstering economical. Backbone's client the International Maritime Organisation in London recently re-upholstered its 750-seat theatre that was 20 per cent costly less than buying new seats.

"It used to be that a client would want three prices for a job, the high, low and in-between options. Now it seems increasingly they want a most-green option, a most-economical option and an in-between. Compromises are often made on leathers, fabrics and metal finishes. But chromium on steel is still popular, although the process for creating it is highly toxic," notes Sanderson.

The idea of carbon footprinting your furniture or furniture supply chain is relatively new, explains Dr Peter Beele, head of technical development at the Furniture Industry Research Association (Fira). The association offers support services to the furniture supply chain including fire testing, quality certification, and engineering. In April it launched Furniture Footprinter, a web-based analysis tool to help reduce a carbon footprint.

"There really wasn't much carbon footprinting until about a year ago," says Beele who has a PhD in wood science and 25 years in the furniture and timber research sector. "The drivers

for it are the specifiers of furniture who are reacting to their corporate investors desire for corporate social responsibility. There is also the fact of government targets in the public sector to reduce departmental carbon footprints overall."

Material evidence

Sceptics argue against anything being 100 per cent recyclable but Beele believes furniture can come pretty close. This is especially true if the material is reusable in some way. This means it likely hasn't been through many chemical or other processes to make in the first place.

"It's still early days yet for sustainability on a large scale in the furniture industry," he says. "My advice to FMs is to ask your supply chain partners two things. Can you measure your CO2 footprint? If not, are you putting in programmes to do so? Remember that there is no such thing as a perfect footprint. If you buy on lowest price only, then things will never change in the supply chain. So if you go down the environmental route, stick with it."

Jorgen Josefsson, the UK managing director for Swedish firm RH Form, agrees the domestic furniture sector in the UK is playing catch-up on the environmental stakes. Nonetheless, the market is developing fast and RH is now importing chairs that use horsehair instead of foam. Drivers of Mercedes S-Class cars will understand that its horse hair is especially ergonomic, he says. It conducts heat and moisture very well and is also completely biodegradable in about five years.

As a supplier and maker of furniture, RH Chairs has a 'take it back' agreement since 2000 in Sweden with firms that supply parts or make complete chairs for RH. In this way, says Josefsson, when RH takes the chair back, all the chair's parts -- wood, metal, plastic, aluminium -- are taken back by the original supplier.

What makes this easier is that no chrome, PVC or mixed plastics are used in RH furniture. These materials are notoriously difficult to recycle and may end up in landfill even if taken back by an original supplier in the supply chain. Josefsson's advice to FM is think "life cycle" when buying furniture.

The re-upholstering option is become more fashionable, says Bill Squires, managing director of Work Inc's Work Services division. "It's part of a general move away from the disposable society. More often people are thinking about what happens after an item loses its usefulness." The effect has been to improve the bottom-end of a firm's products so there is less a quality gap between the higher and lower ends.

More to come

The market is also opening up for interiors consultants and specialists to take strategic control of a client's furniture stock. One option becoming more popular with large firms is to store furniture no longer needed but whose high quality means there is still much life left in them.

The specialist will arrange storage, make an inventory, care for the items in storage and advise the client what they have and what the items could be used for. But, says Squires, the key is that the items be of sufficiently high quality in the first place so that the cost of storage outweighs disposal and purchase of new items. Also, they should have a certain fashion-neutrality about them so they are acceptable to staff if the items are brought back from storage and used again.

Whatever option is chosen, it should be part of a larger corporate social responsibility, says Squires. But remember that donating to charities entails transportation and dispersal costs that the FM must bear. This could be totally acceptable, even desirable, if the overall CSR objective is to aid a particular charity or charities in general.

Even when CSR is considered, there is nothing like a favourite chair, says Squires. Work Services recently re-upholstered 15 US-made folding stools for the BBC Symphony Orchestra. "It was a complete refurbishment including re-upholster, re-foam, re-spray and new rubber feet. Some people just love their chairs."