



OFAS newsletter

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Crunch Time



by Jorgen Josefsson

While the world gets itself increasingly stressed about the credit crunch, it may turn out to be something of a blessing in disguise for some professions. So, even while the commercial property market has been taking a bit of a battering, the same economic pressures that have been responsible may mean the people charged with designing and managing offices could find there is a renewed focus on applying their particular areas of expertise to get the best value out of the workplace. Not least because the business case for what they can achieve is now so persuasive.

One of the ongoing strengths of facilities management is that it is such a broad discipline. Because it touches on so many aspects of the organisation it provides an incredibly broad scope of opportunities for both cost savings and return on investment. It cuts all ways depending on how you look at things. If you take the issue of ergonomics, you can see it as a way of reducing absenteeism and ill-health but you can also look at it as a way of promoting good health, of making people more productive and of helping them to be happier at work. It all counts.

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Enough of the doom and gloom. It's a New Year with new hopes, new opportunities and already, no doubt, a whole trail of broken resolutions. But take heart, to paraphrase Alfred Lord Tennyson, "It is better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all". And remember the guilty pleasure of that first post-resolution cigarette, or the joyous bite into the condemned Mars bar. Yes, resolutions are a jolly good thing. We can look forward to the day we break them.

Much has already been reported about Orgatec; there's only so much that can be written about a bench and that has been said already. A major focus was the new seating ranges being shown, with their diverse claims to ergonomic excellence. Our lead article this quarter takes a holistic look at the subject and places a whole new emphasis on the ergonomic value of movement as opposed to posture.

Another bright thing – some of our members have been with us for the whole or a very large part of our existence – 20 years plus. Thank you so much for your loyalty; it's a very comfortable feeling to have so many friends to talk to daily, even if we are yet to meet some of you. Isn't it the Irish who say a stranger is a friend you haven't met yet? In our case a stranger is a member we haven't managed to sign up yet!

Everyone at ofas wishes you all a good New Year, with just a few more rays of light at the end of that tunnel.

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It is **this** switch from an essentially negative mindset towards an unapologetically positive one that I hope will mark a changing approach to how we see issues like ergonomics. Traditionally, ergonomics has been about posture, about how to sit correctly, about reducing the risk of harm to people rather than looking after their well-being.

Fortunately this is changing, largely because the research on the links between workplace design and well-being is pretty much irrefutable. To put it in cold business terms, it is absolutely clear that an enlightened approach to the design and management of offices can help firms to significantly leverage the value of their most important asset; people.

One of the most significant manifestations of this change is a principle that I believe has entered mainstream business thinking for the first time over the past year or so; it is the idea that ergonomics is far more about movement than it is about posture. The first signs that this was now accepted as a mainstream idea were felt at Orgatec in October where the focus was very much on seating and ergonomic design in general and on the movement principle in particular.

The widespread acceptance of this principle will not only have profound implications for the designers, manufacturers, sellers and buyers of seating and other products but will also revolutionise the way we view office design because it is essentially about promoting wellbeing rather than reducing the risk of poor health which has been the underlying concern of posture based ergonomics and its related legislation and standards.

Unfortunately, most chairs in the UK are still sold with movements which can mean a compromise for the user. For example, a synchronised movement doesn't necessarily provide the best solution for most users. This sheer ubiquity of this type of chair is largely rooted in tradition but it can be a dangerous point of view for employers to adopt, especially because it is also rooted in the principle that ergonomics is about posture and reducing the risk of harm to the user, rather than the principle that it should be about movement and improving the well-being and productivity of the them. With a traditional synchronised mechanism when the seat moves by one degree, the back moves in a fixed ratio, so a particular user does not automatically achieve the best seating position. The alternative and best option is to have a movement with an individually adjustable back so the shape of the seat is tailored for the individual and lumbar support remains constant.



What is also important is that this is not seen as a solution to a specific back care or ergonomic problem. This is not a clinical issue but one that affects the organisation day to day and can have a profound impact on the bottom line. Over recent years business has become far more about movement, with people moving between offices, working on the move, in client offices and wherever. Even when they're in the office, mobile technology also encourages them to move extensively within the workplace, from desks to meeting rooms, break-out spaces to private rooms. It's inevitable that the same need for free movement is being seen at the micro level of the chair as well as the macro level of the workplace. Put quite simply, good ergonomics is good business.

Jorgen Josefsson is Managing Director of RH Chairs.