

Furniture focus

Research by the CABE shows comfortable employees can be up to 25 per cent more productive in the working environment than staff who feel uncomfortable



The office context

With the state of the workplace now the third most important reason for choosing an employer, isn't it time you updated your furniture? Maureen Moody finds there's inspiration at hand this autumn



Shabby offices are bad for business. People don't want to work for companies with untidy, rundown facilities. Customers don't like buying goods or services from them, and clients are reluctant to award them contracts.

Most of us instinctively feel this way about other organisations' premises, so the chances are that others are looking critically at our own. A few years ago, the American Society of Interior Designers found workplaces to be the third most important criterion for people in choosing an employer – ahead of job satisfaction and location. In Britain, research by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) shows comfortable employees are 25 per cent more productive than staff who feel uncomfortable. A recent HSBC survey highlighted dissatisfaction with overcrowding, open-plan environments and out-of-date furniture and fittings. When the architecture firm Gensler interviewed middle managers, many believed their company didn't consider the quality of their working environment to be a high business priority, some saying they would be embarrassed to show customers around the place.



All good reasons to refurbish and refurnish. But hold on – is your new office interior going to be about making people more comfortable or saving money? Two out of every five people talking to Gensler said that minimising office costs was the main reason behind the design of their office. And even after office refurbishments people were still complaining.

So what do they want. Utopia? Well if they do, they'll soon have a chance to find out what it looks like. *Utopian Office: The Movie* will be showing at Context, Earl's Court 2, in October. It's just one of the innovations at the office interiors and furnishings show. *Utopian Office* is a visual journey through some of the most interesting workspaces in London, with commentary from recognised designers and satisfied clients. They'll be talking about what people expect from their workplace, and the objectives that clients set, and they'll be showing how designers implement these.

Design Icons is a linear, wall-based feature that looks at the history of office design, spotlighting key product developments that have happened over the past 150 years, and specifically over the past 50. You'll be able to see products that you may have been using every day with a new perspective on how important they are to our lives. The display will include classics such as the 1950s' Saarinen Tulip Chair, Foster's Nomos Table and the Hille Polyprop chair.

Context 2005 aims to focus not just on beautiful interiors, but on the business benefits that can be derived from them. Exhibitors will concentrate on interior solutions, so you'll be seeing less of their

set product ranges, and more about the useful systems they have put in place for their clients. This is to show how good workspace design adds value to a business and contributes to the bottom line; how it affects the perception of people visiting the building; how furniture can convey corporate identity; and how it can enable businesses to adapt to future change.

Immediately apparent to Context visitors will be the innovative floor plan. Traditionally, exhibitions have had a linear layout with aisles like supermarkets. But this makes the visitor's day boring. It's confining and claustrophobic. Chris Fountain of CMPi, the organisers, believes visitors and exhibitors want some fresh thinking: 'The feedback from previous shows in this sector has always been the same,' he says. 'Visitors are left disorientated by the bland layout and exhibitors have been disappointed by the lack of real opportunities to meet with visitors. We feel that we have responded to these demands with a space and a format that will transform the experience that both the visitors and the exhibitors have at the event.'

Fountain explains that the Context floor plan will be open like a department store, with curved islands of stands that should encourage exhibitors to think differently about their presentation and to make it more pleasant for visitors.

See for yourself

At the Eurotek stand you'll be able to see call-centre furniture that gives users more flexibility. Access, a bench system, features rectangular workstations with worktops that lift easily to allow access to the cabling. You'll





also be able to see Eurotek's new beam system called Stretch. Here, the frame slides horizontally to elongate, and the cable management underneath stretches with it.

Morris Office will continue the theme of solutions, talking to visitors about its complete package of services. 'We'll be launching our high-quality seating offer and a new storage option called Times2. This is receiving a lot of attention because of its small footprint and the volume it contains,' says MD David Rand. 'We'll be aiming at architects, designers and FMs, and we'll have a presentation screen, plenty of brochures about our partnerships, and information about our new showroom in Clerkenwell.'

Marc Bird, Kinnarp's UK head of marketing, wants visitors to think about how they use adjustable furniture. 'If you buy a bike,' he points out, 'the first thing you do sit on it and adjust the saddle height, then adjust the handlebars to the saddle height. In the office, people adjust their chair and then readjust it to match the fixed desk, wasting all the investment in an ergonomic and adjustable chair. So we'll be talking to visitors about adapting office workstations to the personal needs and preferences of multi-users in flexible work areas.'

Study furniture

It's not just the visual content of an exhibition that provides value - intellectual content is important too, and Fountain says this will be addressed by the seminars. 'Throughout the duration of the show we will be hosting a number of seminars, discussions and presentations that embrace the four key themes of the show - knowledge,

productivity, environment and design. Organisations such as Innovation RCA and the Design Council will be leading some of these sessions, and we are confident the content will be fresh, highly pertinent and very thought-provoking.'

'One of the highlights of the show will be the official launch of The Work Foundation's report, Cracking the Performance Code - How Firms Succeed. This investigates the link between the workplace, business performance and individual productivity, and shows what differentiates high performing firms from those which perform poorly. We're also featuring some work by the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre, which focuses on designing for a diverse world. So we'll be looking at inclusive design in the office,' Fountain explains.

The current trend for TV home makeover shows and design magazines all indicate how much our surroundings contribute to our home lives. Consequently, there's now a huge interest in comfort, colour, form, functionality and ambience. In the same way, the organisers of Context want to show everyone in the workplace the importance of a pleasant and productive work environment.

'Well-designed office furniture is not just about chrome and wood - it's about business. As Fountain comments, 'the case for chairs is well made, but the business case has never been established for other furniture - desking, storage, carpeting, lighting. At Context, end-users will be able to see the business case - exactly what these products will do for them; how they all work together, and how they create an environment that helps people do their jobs.' **tmx**

According to Gensler, most middle managers believe their companies don't consider the quality of their working environment to be a high business priority



Further information

Context will run from October 11-13, at Earl's Court 2. Registration is available on-line at www.contextlive.co.uk