Selecting task seating—the most-used work tool in the office—is one of the most critical decisions facility managers make in terms of the health, comfort, and productivity of their employees. Yet many companies still evaluate chairs in the same way they evaluate desks and carpeting. Outlined here is a strategy FMs can use to help ensure that they purchase the best chairs for their workers.

As recently as 10 years ago, all task chairs were essentially the same. They offered basically the same features and functions and varied primarily in terms of aesthetics and textile offerings. As a result, selection criteria were often focused on how well the chair would coordinate with the office decor. However, as FMs have probably noticed at NeoCon over the past few years, task chairs have changed. No longer solely the domain of the major furniture manufacturers, task chairs are now available from so many sources and with such a wide variety of features and functions that choosing the right one is difficult. And this difficult task is made more so because it is paramount to the well-being of the users. Yet despite the long-term impact of the office chair on its users, many companies still utilize a haphazard evaluation process.

Before its most recent work station seating purchase, one large financial institution reportedly lined up six chairs in a hallway and invited employees to try them out and vote for their favorites. The only good thing about this approach is that it’s delightfully democratic. But it is actually the worst possible scenario. Those voting were given no guidelines about what to look for or how they should try using the adjustments. Some probably based their votes on chair fabric. They were not trying out the chairs at workstations (where they would be used). And they were trying them out for only a few seconds or a minute at most. These conditions resulted in a choice that’s virtually no better than random.

Not all companies make this mistake. Carol McCaffrey, facility manager for Gillette’s Boston, MA, headquarters, says her department stays on top of developments in the field of ergonomics. “We try to get the most ergonomic chairs that we can,” she says, “based on the current offerings at the major trade shows. We revise our standards as

### TOP 5 WAYS TO IMPROVE THE SELECTION PROCESS

To help guarantee that the right choice is made, facility managers should:

- **involve employees.** The people who will be using the chairs should be the ones to decide which chair most satisfies their individual requirements.

- **use an appropriate evaluation form.** An evaluation form, such as the one found on Cornell’s website, should be utilized to make the decision as objective as possible. Prior to the evaluation, employees should be trained to understand why the form’s various criteria are important.

- **test chairs in a real work environment.** Only by using a chair at a desk during a workday will someone be able to accurately judge its comfort and performance.

- **evaluate chairs for at least two to three days.** Sitting in a chair for five minutes is like testdriving a car in a driveway. Evaluators must be given the opportunity to really put a chair through its paces. Ideally, the evaluation should be done at a workstation.

- **do not give training on the chairs prior to the evaluation.** Most users will not receive chair training prior to receiving their new chair. Therefore, training users prior to the evaluation will likely skew the results.
better products become available.” McCaffrey, who is responsible for 1,700 such chairs, says that her team orders demo chairs from several different manufacturers and then assigns them to be tried out for a couple of days at work stations. Then the group tries to establish some consensus.

Brian Irwin is senior manager for properties at Cerner Corporation, a healthcare software company in Kansas City, MO; he’s responsible for where (and on what) 2,000 people sit all day. Recently, the company did an evaluation of the workstation seating at the company’s call center. “We brought in four companies’ chairs and invited a group of call center associates to test them in their spaces for two weeks.”

Gillette and Cerner are on the right track, but they could go even farther. Dr. Alan Hedge heads the Human Factors and Ergonomics Research Group in the department of Design and Environmental Analysis at Cornell University. His group researches ways to improve usability, comfort, health and performance through better ergonomic design. According to Hedge, the most important things for creating a healthy workplace posture are a good ergonomic chair; optimal keyboard and mouse position; and optimal monitor and document position. “Other furniture items, such as overhead storage, pedestals storage, worksurface area and worksurface finish, which constitute the bulk of the costs per work station, are almost irrelevant from an ergonomic standpoint,” he says. “Consequently, companies can readily cut furniture costs by minimizing the less essential items and reallocating funds to improving the immediate workspace of the seated worker, which is the microenvironment that actually affects their health and performance.”

Buying a chair is somewhat like buying a car—you get what you pay for. “A good quality chair will be more expensive,” Hedge says, “but it will pay for itself in improved worker productivity and health. And it will be built to a higher standard of reliability, with better, longer lasting materials. Most low-cost chairs simply don’t support the body well as the worker changes posture, and they don’t stand up to the rigors of repeated movements and daily use, so they are simply not cost-effective in the longer run.”

A few months ago, Hedge’s research group developed an Ergonomic Seating Evaluation Form so that facility managers, designers and users would have a simple, fast way of assessing work station seating. Since

### 5 WORST MISTAKES THAT FMS MAKE

When selecting workstation seating, ergonomists advise that facility managers avoid:

- **Taking manufacturers’ ergonomic claims at face value.**
  Just because a manufacturer says that its product is ergonomic doesn’t necessarily make it so. Claims must be backed up by scientific research.

- **Looking at a limited range of offerings.**
  The right chair may not be offered by the chosen systems manufacturer – or even by the chosen dealer. Facility managers should investigate all possible choices before narrowing their search.

- **Letting the specifier’s personal preferences affect the decision.**
  What’s right for one person may not be right for everyone. Only democratic decisions result in the best possible choice.

- **Short or artificial evaluations.**
  Sitting on a chair in a hallway for one minute is in no way representative of how that chair will be experienced day in and day out. Evaluations must take place in a real working environment for a minimum of two to three days.

- **Basing choice on unimportant or misguided criteria.**
  Textile offerings and aesthetic appeal or “coolness” are among the criteria that should be minimized during an evaluation. Comfort and performance-related criteria must be the guide.

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*Interiors & Sources March 2002*
that time, the form has been downloaded thousands of times. "The form is product-neutral and based on ergonomics principles and our research," Hedge says. "It is meant to help people make judgements based on those ergonomic seating design considerations that will best promote healthy sitting."

The form lists five evaluation criteria and asks the user to respond (on a one-to-10 scale) to three aspects of each:

- **chair adjustments** (Are there adjustments for the seat pan depth, the back height, and arm supports?)
- **seat comfort** (After at least 90 minutes of use, how comfortable is the seat cushion, the backrest cushion, and the armrest?)
- **ease of use** (How easy is it to change the recline position and the armrest height (the two most important adjustments) as well as the chair height?)
- **body support** (How does the back support and lumbar support feel and how is the armrest support range?)
- **overall chair experience** (How would the user rate the overall ease of use of the chair, its overall appearance, and its overall comfort?)

Putting an evaluation into place is fairly simple. "A little effort goes a long way," says Iris Sokol, president of Fitness Works at Work, Inc., which provide fitness, wellness and ergonomics consulting to companies in the Boston area. She suggests that facility managers choose three chairs that meet basic parameters, and tap employees from various parts of the company to try them out. The group should include men and women of various body types, if possible. This group should be briefed about the optimum position of the body at the workstation and asked to evaluate how easy the chairs were to adjust. The group should spend three to five days with the chairs, and then submit their feedback using Hedge’s form or some similar set of specific criteria.

"Managers will be surprised at how often there will be a clear winner," Sokol says. "And this approach also demonstrates to employees that the company cares about their health and comfort."

Trying out a chair in a hallway or conference room (Hedge calls this the “five-second butt test”) is basically useless because it doesn’t allow people to assess any of the most important aspects—the chair’s adaptability to movement at the workstation, its long term comfort, and ease of adjustment. According to Hedge, “soft and squishy feel good in the short-term but are not good in the long-term because they restrict circulation.” As a result, this approach may lead to the selection of chairs that are the least comfortable after several hours of sitting.

Labels and looks don’t mean much. “Virtually all chairs are called ergonomic these days,” Hedge says. “And just because a chair looks ‘cool’ doesn’t mean it’s the best option from an ergonomic standpoint, although ‘cool’ and ‘ergonomic’ are by no means mutually exclusive.”

Chairs need adjustments but more knobs and levers are not necessarily better. In fact, few office workers today know how to use those manual features. “Unfortunately, most people sit locked in static postures or, conversely, have no real back support simply because they are unable to operate their chairs correctly,” says Hedge. It’s easy to be seduced by the added functionality of manual adjustments. However, unless this functionality is taken advantage of by the user, it’s meaningless.
“In the world of ergonomics,” Hedge says, “‘adjustability’ was the watchword of the ‘90s, but this has been replaced by ‘usability.’ Usability means that people can operate products in an intuitive way, without having to learn to use complex procedures or controls. The best products adjust to the needs of the user without the user having to do anything to adjust the products. Usability implies simplicity, ease of use, controls that feel natural, and elimination of the need to constantly be making manual adjustments.”

Involving employees in the choice of the chair can help facility managers make the right choice, and it can communicate a strong message about the company’s concern for and investment in its workforce. It may also result in a valuable, broad sense of buy-in once the choice is made. And studies are showing that ergonomics can have an impact on the bottom line; when people are comfortable at the work station, they suffer fewer body problems and are generally more productive.

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**ERGO INFO**

Facility managers looking for information on ergonomically correct seating have many more resources available to them today than they did just a few years ago. Here are a few helpful organizations and tools:

- Cornell University Ergonomics Web site: http://ergo.human.cornell.edu/
- Ergonomic Seating Evaluation Form: http://ergo.human.cornell.edu/ahSEATING.html
- Human Factors and Ergonomics Society: www.hfes.org/