INSIDER’S GUIDE

The Top 10 Things to Consider BEFORE Buying an Office Chair
Insider’s Guide to Buying an Office Chair: The Top 10 Things to Consider

Did you know that the average American office worker spends about 2,200 hours per year sitting in a chair at a desk or other workstation? Statistics like this only boost the already-large amount of evidence that links office chair choices to overall office productivity.

Yet, in many cases, office chairs are still purchased without much thought — and often by comparing costs only. When buyers do pause before acting, they tend to focus mostly on ergonomics. And while important (it’s our #1 factor to consider below), ergonomics are not the only factor you should consider.

Fortunately, with just a little pre-planning and a quick review of this Top 10 Things to Consider guide, business owners, managers, office planners and procurement specialists can make smart buying decisions. And those decisions just may have a huge impact on employee satisfaction and productivity — and even profits — right away.
CONSIDERATION #1:

**Ergonomics**

Ergonomics typically play a central role in office chair purchase decisions, and that’s a good thing. Studies show that paying attention to this factor can go a long way toward decreasing repetitive work injuries and even the amount of sick time employees take for head, shoulder, back and arm pain.

However, there are few official standards for use of the term “ergonomic” when it comes to office furniture. That means you’ll need to look beyond the marketing buzzwords to see what each chair model really offers.

The easiest way to begin your search is by looking for a chair that is easily adjustable, especially in terms of height (a range of at least 16 inches is recommended) and seat tilt (a range of at least 5 degrees forward and backward is a good starting point).

Consider whether or not a chair can be easily adjusted while a user is sitting in it (look for pneumatic levers or gas lifts for easy height adjustments). And remember that most users prefer office chairs that swivel 360 degrees without much effort.

You’ll also want to consider whether a chair’s seat depth (measurement from back to front) can be adjusted. Some chairs offer depth adjustability by sliding the seat backward and forward with a fixed back rest; others keep the seat fixed and offer a backrest that moves forward and backward.

Some chairs offer a seat back that tilts forward and backward, which is good for reclining. (If a backrest reclines more than 30 degrees, however, make sure the chair has a headrest, too, for extra spine support). But keep in mind that a seat back that reclines or tilts forward doesn’t truly change the seat depth. And the more seat depth adjustability a chair has, the wider range of employees it will likely suit.

Armrests are another consideration: OSHA (the national Occupational Safety and Health Administration) recommends that armrest height be adjustable. Some chairs go a step further by offering removable armrests or armrests that enable the distance between them to be shortened or widened.

Some chairs carry “ergonomic endorsements” from organizations like the American Physical Therapy Association and others. These endorsements can be helpful if you need a quick way to ensure all of the top ergonomic recommendations are met. Your local office furniture dealer can provide guidance on the top ergonomic features to consider, as well.

CONSIDERATION #2:

**Overall Comfort**

Just because an office chair offers tons of ergonomic features — or a lot of extra “bells and whistles” — that doesn’t necessarily mean it will feel great to one or more users.

That is why testing a chair before buying is important. Buying a chair unseen and untested can be risky. A chair that promises “lumbar support,” for example, can be either highly comfortable or highly uncomfortable depending on the placement, firmness and adjustability of the support. Visiting a dealer showroom, then, gives you the opportunity to try out a wide range of chairs before making a final decision.

If you are purchasing a number of chairs for a variety of users, consider opting for two to three flexible models and offer your employees a choice. A dealer who represents a large range of manufacturers can be helpful when you need to hone your selections.
CONSIDERATION #3:

Size

Employees and workspaces come in all sizes, and office chairs need to accommodate those sizes.

Generally, a chair’s seat should measure 15 to 17 inches from the back to the chair’s front edge. But specifically, the seat simply needs to be long enough to fit most of your users comfortably.

The same goes for seat width. A seat should be wide enough for a user’s thighs to fit easily without touching the armrest bases. About 18 inches is a typical width for seats that work for a variety of users. Testing showroom models, again, is important here.

Do keep in mind that some chair manufacturers offer seat sliders, width-adjustable armrests and a selection of custom seat widths to help adapt to a broader range of employee needs.

Also consider that most office chairs are designed for users who weigh less than 250 pounds. However, there are “big and tall,” “heavy duty” and “plus-size” chairs available, as well, for employees who might need the extra room and support.

Regardless of the size of the user, you’ll also need to consider the size of the actual workspace a chair will be used in every day. Obviously, smaller areas require smaller chairs. But there are legal factors that must be complied with, as well, to meet the requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act. For instance, the knee space afforded by the office chair and desk should be at least 30 inches wide, 19 inches deep and 27 inches high.

CONSIDERATION #4:

Base Stability

One of the most overlooked considerations when buying an office chair is simple yet fundamental: the chair’s base.

First, you can choose from chairs with wheels or no wheels. Ergonomically, wheels are recommended for ease of movement at the workstation, but a good swivel chair can also provide that addition. However, if a chair will need to be moved frequently into another office space or conference room, wheels may be a necessity.

If you do opt for wheels, you’ll need to think about the wheel/caster material: Metal typically lasts longer than plastic, but if a chair won’t be used daily, plastic wheels could work and may be less expensive. Metal-covered casters roll well over carpet, but casters coated in rubber roll better on (and do less damage to) hard surfaces.

The material that the base is made of is also a factor. Nylon and plastic bases are typical; nylon tends to outlast plastic over the long term. Aluminum bases are strong but lightweight and offer a more modern look. Steel bases are some of the most durable, but can be more expensive than other materials.

CONSIDERATION #5:

Overall Durability

Office chairs can be a significant investment, especially if you are outfitting an entire office. So, you’ll want to be sure to consider overall durability. After all, chairs are usually daily workhorses, and if you don’t choose wisely upfront, you may be buying chairs far more often than you’d like.

One way to estimate how durable a chair will be is to find out if it meets or exceeds ANSI/BIFMA standards. These standards, developed by a private, nonprofit group, are often mandatory for government purchases. The standards relate to durability, strength and stability in areas such as: chair base, armrest, seat back, tilt mechanics, casters, foot ring, swivel system and long-term seating impact. You can also speak with one of our office furniture experts to find out more about the durability of specific types of office chairs.
CONSIDERATION #6:
Contouring & Padding

Contouring and padding in chairs are often the first factors some manufacturers take away when trying to cut costs. This is another area where testing a chair in a showroom can mean the difference between a great purchase or a purchasing mistake.

Overall, many ergonomic specialists recommend chairs that have padded edges on all sides and a front edge that is rounded in what OSHA calls a “waterfall” fashion. This type of padding helps protect a user’s blood circulation to their legs.

But, as with many office chair features, remember that not all padding is created equal. Look for padding that is designed to allow air circulation. Test for firmness, too, as chairs that are too soft can cause back muscle strain and fatigue.

Some of today’s state-of-the-art chairs do not offer padding at all. Rather, they offer plastic mesh seating that allows for maximum air circulation and molds exactly to the contour of a user’s body for unique support. Obviously, this would not be a good choice if more than one person uses the same chair.

Padded armrests can also run the gamut between hard and soft; OSHA recommends softer armrests, while some occupational therapy groups believe a firmer armrest is better. This is another area where user testing can be helpful.

About contouring: A chair should provide some sort of lumbar support that matches the curve of the lower back. However, keep in mind that OSHA recommends avoiding highly contoured seats because these can negatively affect posture.

One final consideration here: Some seats and backrests are made of molded foam and others are made of cut foam. Each has its own strengths. For instance, cut foam tends to be less expensive. But molded foam is considered highly resistant to “pancaking” over time, will keep its shape longer and may more closely match a user’s unique body shape.

CONSIDERATION #7:
Fabric

Most people, when choosing fabric for an office chair, consider how well it will match the office décor and how it relates to personal likes/dislikes. But you may also need to consider whether or not the fabric is breathable and easy to clean.

Cloth is one of the most breathable fabrics; fabrics like vinyl and leather tend to trap body heat and reduce air circulation. Cloth is also typically less expensive. But it’s a tradeoff: Vinyl and leather are far easier to keep clean and don’t tear as easily as cloth.

Some of the newest chair styles include no fabric at all — instead a highly breathable, but often not very soft, mesh material is used.

Another consideration? Overall performance of the fabric. You’ll want to consider whether or not a chair’s fabric meets standard performance guidelines set by the Association for Contract Textiles (ACT). Look for these symbols:

- **Abrasion** — The surface wear of a fabric caused by rubbing and contact with another fabric.
- **Colorfastness to Light** — A material’s degree of resistance to the fading effect of light.
- **Flammability** — The measurement of a fabric’s performance when it is exposed to specific sources of ignition.
- **Physical Properties** — Pilling is the formation of fuzzy balls of fiber on the surface of a fabric that remain attached to the fabric. **Breaking strength** is the measurement of stress exerted to pull a fabric apart under tension. ** Seam Slippage** is the movement of yarns in a fabric that occurs when it is pulled apart at a seam.
- **Wet & Dry Crocking** — Transfer of dye from the surface of a dyed or printed fabric onto another surface by rubbing.
CONSIDERATION #8:

Corporate Image

Corporate image today is maintained by far more than signage and a logo, and your office chairs can say a lot about your business. For instance, high-end, high-design chairs tell your customers (and employees) that you are a cutting-edge, luxury brand. More traditional office chairs can speak volumes about the classic nature of your business. Leather tends to convey corporate, closed board-room style; mesh and/or aluminum chairs say modern, fresh and young.

You’ll also, of course, need to match the design of your office chairs to the corresponding workstations.

CONSIDERATION #9:

Eco-Friendliness

If your company strives to put eco-friendly philosophies in place, your choice of office chairs can enhance those efforts.

Look for chairs made from sustainable or recycled materials, and ones that feature low chemical emissions that can help indoor air quality measures.

Specifically, seek out chairs with the GREENGUARD certification and/or SCS Indoor Advantage Gold/Silver certification to ensure chairs contain low emissions. Other helpful certifications include the Cradle-to-Cradle sustainability certifications and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) seal.

Be sure to ask your office furniture dealer which chair manufacturers are striving to be more eco-friendly by using renewable energy in their factories, working to minimize waste in packaging, delivery and/or incorporating other environmentally friendly policies.

CONSIDERATION #10:

Quality and Manufacturer Reputation

Finally, you’ll want to consider a chair’s known quality and the reputation of its manufacturer. Our office furniture experts can provide you with other customer feedback on prior purchases and answer any questions about the pros and cons of different chairs, in terms of quality and reputation. You’ll also want to watch out for “lookalike” products that may have a similar design of a leading manufacturer’s, but are made of lower quality materials.

Of course, reviewing return policies and warranty information (some manufacturers offer up to a 12-year warranty; others may only offer a year) can also give you a good indication of how consistently a manufacturer will stand behind its product.

Sources:
3. Occupational Safety and Health Administration website, osha.gov
4. Office Furniture USA manufacturers
THE SMART BUYER’S CHECKLIST

Complete this simple checklist for each office chair model you are considering. After completing, you will know which areas need additional research, and just how well each chair will meet your overall needs.

Does the chair swivel 360-degrees? ........................................... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Is the height adjustable? ............................................................. _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Does the back recline? .............................................................. _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Can you make adjustments to the chair while sitting in it? .................................. _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Is the seat depth adjustable via the backrest or seat itself? .................................. _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Does the chair offer adjustable or removable armrests? ..................................... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Does the chair have any third-party ergonomic endorsements? ............................... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Can you test the chair in person at a local showroom? ......................................... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

If you can test out the chair, does it provide a high level of comfort? ......................... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Will the size (and weight limits) of the chair suit most of your users? ......................... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

If needed, is the chair easily adjustable to suit tall, petite or wide users? ..................... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Will the chair fit with the measurements of most workstations, allowing ample knee room? _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Are the wheels suitable for the floor surface they’ll be used on? ............................... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Does the chair meet ANSI/BFIMA standards for durability? .................................. _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Will the chair’s padding and body contouring suit user needs? ................................. _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Will the chair’s fabric color and design work well with your current office décor? .......... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Is the fabric easy to clean? ........................................................................ _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Does the fabric and/or seat allow for air circulation? ............................................. _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Does the fabric meet performance standards set by the ACT? .................................. _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Does the chair’s design match your overall corporate image? ................................. _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Does the chair help your company meet any environmentally friendly goals? .......... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Is the chair manufacturer known for quality? ...................................................... _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure

Does the chair’s price fit easily within your budget? ............................................. _____ Yes _____ No _____ Unsure
We can help you select the furniture you need at a price you want.

If reading through this guide makes you feel a bit apprehensive about the number of options out there for office furniture, we understand — and we’re here to help you navigate through to a smart decision you won’t regret.

We take pride in being a true partner who will work to learn your specific needs and offer sound advice that takes the worry out of office furniture purchases.

With 20 years of experience, Office Furniture USA has developed a strong reputation based on:

• A large selection of more than 2 million items from over 30 manufacturers
• Worry-free selection and installation
• Local support and service – before and after the sale
• Quick Ship Delivery
• Affordable, competitive pricing

Request your FREE catalog at: www.OFUSA.com or browse our online version at: www.OFUSAecatalog.com

This guide is compliments of your local Office Furniture USA dealer:

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