

by R. Bruce Anderson



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# Factors Influencing Selection of Office Furniture by Corporations and Universities

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### **SUMMARY ABSTRACT**

Evaluation of the factors that influence the selection of office furniture by large corporations and universities shows that quality, appearance, and purchase price have the most important influence on the purchase decision. The intended use of the furniture and the appearance of the furniture were the key factors in the purchase of wooden furniture.

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**I**F YOU MAKE something to sell, you ought to know something about the people who do the buying. As an aid to the makers of wooden office furniture, we made a study of the buying practices of large corporations and universities.

Manufacturers of office furniture have had increasing sales during the past 10 years. Shipments had a total value of \$1,099 million in 1972 as compared to \$490 million in 1964. However, the proportion of wooden office furniture to metal office furniture shipments has remained nearly constant.

Unlike the household-furniture industry, the office-furniture industry does not have an abundance of information defining the factors that influence their customers' purchasing practices. In our study, we attempted to identify the factors that influence the selection of new office furniture.

## PROCEDURE AND OBJECTIVES

Purchasing officials from large corporations and universities in the Northeast were asked to complete a mailed survey questionnaire. The questions were developed from a pilot survey in the Philadelphia area and from interviews with nine state government purchasing officials.

The objectives of the study were:

1. To determine the importance of purchase price, appearance, service life, maintenance costs, delivery time, and overall quality as criteria in the selection of office furniture.
2. To determine the extent to which personal preferences of the purchasing agent are allowed to influence the decision.
3. To determine which specific articles of office furniture are being purchased and the materials of which they are made.
4. To determine the adequacy of technical information about wooden furniture.
5. To determine how much the availability of furniture, in terms of user requirements, affects the decision.

## FINDINGS

Overall response to the mailed questionnaire was good. Of 554 questionnaires sent out, 337 (61 percent) were completed and returned. An additional 28 (5 percent) were returned incomplete.

### Purchasing Policies

More than 50 percent of both corporations and universities did not have written policies for selection or purchase of new office furniture. Of those that did have such a policy, most also had policies specifying the materials to be used—wood, metal, etc.

Of the purchasing officials who responded, 67 percent had the authority to decide what material the new furniture should be made from. This included 71 percent of the university purchasing officials and 64 percent of the corporation purchasing officials.

More than one-third (37 percent) of the purchasing officials had authority to decide when and what office furniture should be purchased for other units within the organization. University purchasing officials more frequently purchase office furniture for centrally located offices while corporation purchasing officials more frequently purchase for branch offices.

### Value of Furniture Purchased

The total value of furniture reported purchased by the 337 respondents was more than \$55 million. Of the above dollar value, 28 percent was spent on general-purpose desks; file cabinets accounted for another 13 percent; executive desks, swivel chairs, and occasional chairs accounted for 13, 12, and 11 percent respectively.

Five other types of furniture accounted for the rest:

	<i>Percent</i>
Sofas, couches, settees	6
Bookcases	4
Conference tables	3
Other tables	4
Miscellaneous	5

The value of furniture purchased was also

reported by type of material used in construction: wood or metal. Executive desks of wooden construction made up 34 percent of the total wooden office furniture purchased. Occasional chairs (16 percent); sofas, couches, settees (15 percent); general-purpose desks (12 percent); and swivel chairs (8 percent) accounted for most of the other wooden office furniture purchased.

On the other hand, general-purpose desks of metal construction accounted for 37 percent of the total metal office furniture purchased. File cabinets (20 percent), swivel chairs (15 percent), and occasional chairs (9 percent) made up most of the rest.

The pattern of purchasing was similar for both universities and corporations. Both purchased more general-purpose desks than any other single item of office furniture.

Overall, 31 percent of the total value of furniture was purchased for branch offices. Corporations reported that 37 percent of their purchases were for branch offices. Universities reported that 9 percent of their purchases were for branch campuses.

Executive desks made up the largest percentage of purchase values for any of the ten types of wooden office furniture listed in the questionnaire. General-purpose desks made up the largest percentage of purchases for any of the ten types of metal office furniture listed in the questionnaire. However, purchases of general-purpose desks had twice the value of executive desks purchased.

Of the total value of purchases reported, corporations spent nearly 30 percent on general-purpose desks. Universities also spent the largest amount on general-purpose desks—about 23 percent. The other types of furniture broke down this way in value of furniture purchased:

<i>Type of Furniture</i>	<i>Corporations (percent)</i>	<i>Universities (percent)</i>
Filing cabinets	13	15
Executive desks	13	12
Swivel Chairs	12	12
Occasional chairs	10	10
Sofas, couches, etc.	6	7
Bookcases	3	7
Conference tables	3	3
Other tables	4	5
Miscellaneous	5	6
	70	77

## Ratio of Wooden to Metal Furniture

For corporations, the only items of wooden office furniture that had greater purchase values than metal furniture were executive desks, sofas, couches, settees (upholstered furniture), and conference tables. This pattern was the same for both total purchases and purchases for branch offices.

For universities, the only type of wooden furniture having a majority of the purchase value was the upholstered furniture category—sofas, couches, and settees. This was not true for branch purchases: they were predominantly metal office furniture.

## Criteria Used in Selecting Furniture

The respondents considered appearance most important in selecting executive office furniture, and purchase price most important in selecting general-purpose office furniture. Service life was ranked intermediate. Delivery time and maintenance costs were consistently ranked lower in importance than the other criteria.

Respondents were also asked if there were any other criteria that they consider more important than the five listed above. The other criteria most frequently mentioned were:

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Responses (No.)</i>
Function or use	24
Quality	14
Service rendered by vendor	14
Installation	5
Availability under contract (state, local, or national)	4
Other	6
Total	67

## Aspects of Selection Criteria

Appearance was considered in four ways: style, design, harmony with other furniture, and harmony with general office decor. Eighty percent of the respondents considered harmony with other furniture and with the general office decor as important in selecting both executive and general-purpose office furniture. Design was considered important by 74 percent, and style was considered important by 69 percent.

Although harmony with general office

decor and harmony with other furniture were both rated important, harmony with general office decor was rated more important for general-purpose office furniture than for executive-office furniture. Style and decor were considered more important for executive-office furniture than for general-purpose office furniture.

Delivery time required was considered in two ways: (1) least time between order and delivery, and (2) ability to deliver on schedule. Ability to deliver on schedule was considered important for both types of furniture by 89 percent of the respondents. On the other hand, only 30 percent of the respondents considered least time between order and delivery as important.

Maintenance was considered in four ways: (1) ease of replacing damaged parts, (2) ease of repairing damaged parts, (3) resistance to damage, (4) and durability of working surfaces. The rating of these aspects by the respondents pointed out two attitudes about maintenance in selecting new office furniture. First, maintenance is considered even less important in selecting executive-office furniture than in selecting general-purpose office furniture. Second, the emphasis is placed on resistance to damage and durability of working surfaces; that is, non-maintenance rather than ease of replacing or repairing damaged parts.

Service life was considered in two ways: (1) length of expected life and (2) value at end of service life. Length of expected service life was of prime concern. Expected value at the end of service life had little effect on the selection.

### Advertising and Sales Promotion

Respondents were asked two questions about advertising and sales promotion in an attempt to determine if sufficient information is available for them to make decisions favorable to wooden office furniture. The first question was how often had they seen promotional material (brochures, advertisements, etc.). Overall, 69 percent had seen promotional material for wooden office furniture frequently; and 93 percent had fre-

quently seen promotional material for metal office furniture. Thirty percent had seldom seen promotional material for wooden furniture, and 6 percent had seldom seen promotional material for metal office furniture. In general, metal office furniture is better advertised than wooden office furniture.

### Technical Factors

The respondents were also asked whether they considered species of wood used, type of finish, quality of construction, and efficiency of design. A majority replied that all these factors were considered.

### Species of Wood Specified

Purchasing officers for 103 universities and 180 corporations ranked the five species of wood they most commonly specified for office furniture in the following order of preference:

<i>Species</i>	<i>Universities: weighted rank</i>	<i>Corporations: weighted rank</i>
Walnut	1	1
Oak	2	3
Mahogany	4	2
Maple	3	5
Cherry	5	4

In addition to the above five species, 54 university and corporation respondents listed other species of wood sometimes specified for new office furniture:

<i>Species</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>	
	<i>Universities</i>	<i>Corporations</i>
Teak	3	26
Ash	5	0
Elm burl	0	3
Birch	1	2
Rosewood	0	3
Pine	1	0

### Distribution Channels

The respondents reported that purchases were made through various distribution channels, including direct sales from manufacturers, manufacturers' agents, furniture brokers, furniture wholesalers, and furniture retailers.

The largest value of purchases, 25 percent of the total reported, was made through manufacturers' agents. Direct sales from manufacturers were next, 22 percent. Pur-

chases through wholesalers made up 20 percent, and through retailers 18 percent. Purchases through furniture brokers made up only 5 percent of the total. Purchases through other sources made up about 10 percent.

Corporation purchasing conforms generally to the above pattern. The largest value of purchases, 27 percent, are made through manufacturers' agents. Next furniture retailers, 23 percent; closely followed by furniture wholesalers, 19 percent; and purchases direct from manufacturers, 17 percent. Other channels and furniture brokers make up the remaining 15 percent.

Universities, on the other hand, have a different purchasing pattern. They buy more than 41 percent of their furniture directly from manufacturers. Furniture wholesalers and manufacturers' agents combined sell them another 42 percent. Other channels and furniture brokers make up 13 percent of the purchases, while furniture retailers are last with only 4 percent.

About 87 percent of the total reported purchases were a mix of wooden and metal furniture. Only 3 percent were solely wood and 9 percent were solely metal; the remaining 1 percent was neither wood nor metal.

The "other" sources not listed in the questionnaire had the following frequency of purchases:

	<i>Percent</i>
Coop service	27
Contract dealers and/or distributors	23
Designers and/or interior decorators acting as agents	23
State and other governmental contracts	17
Miscellaneous or not specified sources	10

### **Future Prospect**

Most of the respondents (77 percent) expected the proportion of new office furniture made of wood to remain the same in the future. The other respondents felt that the proportion of new office furniture made of wood would change in the future: about 9 percent expect it to increase and 14 percent expect it to decrease.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION**

The majority of both universities and corporations had no written policy about the selection or purchase of new office furniture. Those who did have written policies generally also had policies that included guidelines or restrictions on the type of materials.

Since the purchasing officials are generally not constrained by written policies, they have more freedom to make their own decisions as to the type of office furniture to purchase. Only one-third of the purchasing officials also had the authority to decide when and what office furniture should be purchased for other units within the organization. The purchasing authority was generally decentralized, especially for corporations that had only 33 percent of their purchasing officials at the home offices.

Although the authority to decide when and what office furniture to purchase was generally decentralized, the actual purchasing was more frequently done by the purchasing officials at the home office. The decision to buy a particular type of furniture is made at the local level. The resulting request for purchase is then forwarded to the home-office purchasing official for action. In these cases, the purchasing official at the home office will have little power to change the request from one type of furniture to another.

Corporations — and universities to a lesser degree — tend to rely more on the desires and specifications of architects and decorators and less on a lot of detail specifications. As a result, the controlling influence on whether all metal, all wood, or a combination of these materials is used in the furniture is more often the architect or decorator rather than the purchasing official. This complicates the problem of trying to reach that individual within the organization who has the authority to decide what type of materials will be used.

The largest dollar volume of furniture purchased during the reporting period was in general-purpose desks. Most were of metal

construction. Although quite a few styles today do combine metal with wood as opposed to all metal, the biggest potential market for wooden office furniture would appear to be in this area.

The importance of appearance and purchase price as selection criteria cannot completely explain why metal has such a lead over wood in general-purpose office furniture. Purchase price was ranked as the most important criteria used in selecting general-purpose office furniture for universities. This was the only case in which the respondents, on the average, ranked purchase price higher in importance than appearance. Purchase price was ranked equal in importance with appearance as a selection criteria for corporations' general-purpose office furniture.

Purchasing officials responding to this questionnaire have offered the opinion that metal desks of the general-purpose type offer more value per dollar than wooden desks. This does not necessarily mean higher quality per dollar of purchases. Rather, the purchasing officials feel that, for a limited amount of money, they can buy more metal desks of satisfactory construction than wooden desks.

Within a given price range, however, the selection of furniture goes beyond whether it is made of metal or wood. The furniture product that is innovative in design and has some degree of flexibility will sell better than one that is limited in these features. Then the selection criteria of appearance, quality of construction, delivery time, utilization of space, and product life become more important.

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