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IN DEPTH: OFFICE ENVIRONMENTS

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Office Environments Briefs

Sitting pretty -- and relaxing at work

Thora Qaddumi

Chairs can make a big difference in an office environment.

Tax season and the holidays are the two main times a company benefit at the Houston CPA firm of Ralph & Ralph PC is in the greatest demand.

The "benefit" is a Get-A-Way message chair, where anyone in the eight-person office can take a break, put their feet up and take advantage of the various soothing motions of the chair.

"Some companies get their employees gym memberships. I've heard of some accounting firms that bring in a masseuse when everyone gets tense at tax time," says the firm's president, Paul Ralph. "We thought the chair would be something everyone could enjoy and that would be within our means."

Ralph & Ralph five staff members and three certified public accountants -- Paul Ralph, his son Greg and Greg's wife Simone -- are welcome to sit in the chair. And it's also been popular with clients visiting the firm's Greenway Plaza offices.

An investment in a deluxe ergonomic chair may serve a similar purpose -- keeping executives comfortable on the job.

Among the new products on the market is the Verte advanced ergonomic computer chair, built with a spine designed to support, move and contour to each user's individual spine profile.

The chair adjusts in three dimensions: horizontally, in and out 3.5 inches, and it flexes to the left and to the right.

In development for over 10 years by a team of engineers, designers and doctors, the chair "helps to ease pain and improves posture," according to the manufacturer.

The chair is built with 11 torsion spring-loaded bearing joints that take an impression of a person's spine, then can be locked in position at the touch of a lever.

The chair is available through the online retailer, ErgonomicHome.com, which specializes in ergonomic products for office and home use.

Under-floor cabling provides flexibility

Recent changes in the national electrical code requiring the removal of ceiling network cabling when a space is re-leased is boosting interest in under-floor cabling, according to Russ Allen of Cronan & Associates.

"It's a tremendous expense for a company to go back in and remove ceiling cabling, and it is difficult to re-use," he says. "There's so much spaghetti up there that it isn't worth it, and it can cause particular problems if there is a fire."

Under-floor electrical power and communications cable provides a flexible infrastructure solution to high rates of workforce/building churn and an increasing demand for power and data/com connectivity at every desktop, he says.

Cronan & Associates is the local representative for Flexspace's Cablefloor product, which is sold in Houston through numerous local distributors.

Allen says the product opens up a company's options for space planning and design by allowing them to utilize mobile, freestanding furniture.

Any panel in the continuous floor-wide grid can be easily removed, allowing information technology and electrical personnel to organize and document the power and data/com cable structure it houses. Because of this, the cabling/electrical layout can be reconfigured, serviced or upgraded in a fraction of the time and cost required by conventional cable management methods.

Executives admit they make plenty of mistakes

Management plays a vital role in establishing the office environment, but nobody's perfect, including the boss. Executives polled recently admit making mistakes, from not recognizing staff accomplishments to overworking their teams.

When asked, "What is the biggest mistake you have ever made as a boss?," the most frequently cited issue is lack of communication, at the root of 20 percent of the errors. Poor hiring decisions accounts for 13 percent of the responses.

The survey, developed by Accountemps, includes responses from 150 executives from human resources, finance and marketing departments with the nation's 1,000 largest companies.

Withholding praise was a problem cited by many:

- "I didn't give recognition to someone who turned out to be one of my best employees and soon lost her."
- "I didn't give credit when it was due to individuals who made major contributions."
- "I failed to acknowledge someone who needed to be rewarded. I have regretted that for years."

Letting poor performance go unchecked was another frequently cited misstep:

- "I kept someone on who should have been let go."
- "I didn't recognize that someone was in way over her head. She wasn't able to do the job because she didn't know how."
- "Keeping a person in a position where he failed was my biggest mistake."

Hiring the right staff is a key management challenge:

- "I encouraged a group manager to hire an internal candidate when an external candidate was better qualified."
- "Hiring people who are too similar to me has been a mistake."
- "I hired an executive-level individual for a much less senior-level job."

Some executives wish they had read the writing on the wall:

- "I didn't pick up on signals from disgruntled employees."
- "I regret not seeing the signs that someone was going to leave."
- "I failed to clearly understand an employee's situation and ended up losing him."

Managers regret not being more supportive to staff:

- "I wish I had provided more opportunities for subordinates to engage in projects they enjoyed."
- "I didn't recognize associates' birthdays or anniversaries."
- "I didn't understand that my staff had reached a limit on their ability to produce."
- "I was overly harsh in my criticism, and that brought about insecurities in my employees."

False assumptions often lead to trouble:

- "I assumed I knew what my employees' problems were instead of talking to them."
- "I assumed someone's motives were like mine, and he would want to make his job a career."
- "I assumed someone was very knowledgeable when she wasn't. It backfired on me when a presentation was made."

Some lessons come at a hefty price:

- "I delegated some work on a project and never checked to see if it was completed. A year later, I discovered it had never been done, and it cost the company about a million dollars."

Still, while errors can be painful, it's best to acknowledge them and move on:

- "Early in my career, I didn't admit my mistakes, and it was very damaging. I have since changed my ways."

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