

The Greening of the American Office

By Mary Palmer

Environmental Responsibility Doesn't Stop at Home

April 22nd marks the 35th anniversary of Earth Day...leading Americans to think of creative ways to recycle, reuse and be more environmentally conscious. But once you leave the confinements of "home sweet home", what can you do from 9 to 5 to continue your "green" way of life?

Just like your house, most offices consume water, energy, paper, and other products – the result of which produces a deluge of waste. But the office furniture industry is a prime example of a market segment that is quietly, but effectively, converting its product designs and manufacturing technologies to have a more positive environmental impact—partially in response to government programs, but also because American consumers are demanding products that are gentler on the environment. The industry, in fact, is responding to the green phenomena in some amazing, highly creative ways.



Corn – It's not just for Popping

Take, for example, one of the more recent product innovations – a panel fabric made from corn – introduced by Iowa-based Allsteel, a contract furniture designer and manufacturer. Designed for use in workstations, these new panel fabrics are made from Polylactide acid (PLA), a man-made fiber derived from 100 percent renewable resources.



Allsteel launched the new fabrics through a partnership with Interface Fabrics, and Interface Inc. Company. Through its Terratex® brand, Interface launched the first commercial fabrics to be made if Ingeo® bio-based fibers from Cargill Dow. "Bio-based" fibers require less fossil fuel to produce than traditional hydrocarbon resins, and likewise reduce Greenhouse emissions. Additionally, the fabrics can be commercially composted, thus eliminating their eventual demise as landfill.

Not only does the fabric represent a renewable resource, but it is also the first in the industry to employ an environmentally friendly dyeing and finishing process which ensures the fabric is produced with 100 percent renewable-wind energy. The fabric is being produced in a wide range of designer-preferred colors and styles that complement a variety of office environments. In addition, it has proven to be insect, mold, odor and stain-resistant and generates non-toxic smoke when burned.

"Allsteel has a long history of making conscientious materials selections," said Scott Lesnet, Allsteel's Environmental Manager. "We are committed to using a larger percentage of recycled and sustainable materials in our products. Recycled materials generally take only 25 percent of the energy used to make new materials, resulting in as much as a 75 percent reduction in pollution. As a result, we fully expect to expand our PLA and other Earth-friendly product offerings to additional products in the office furniture industry in the near future."

Furniture Good Enough to Eat

Other than environmentally responsible innovations coming from the office furniture industry include tile frames that are assembled using toggle locks instead of welding, which prevents weld

smoke and metal fumes from being released into the environment. There is also the increased reliance on other natural materials. In addition to corn-based fabrics, other environmentally sensitive materials, like wheat board, are also proving to be highly efficient, “green” alternatives to traditional materials like particle board. Recyclable thermoplastic polymers are also replacing PVC materials.

A unique approach to environmental stewardship comes again from Allsteel with its end of life “take back” option for its award-winning #19 Chair. The ergonomically advanced seating, which was two years in development and is 88 percent recyclable, comes with a “take back” option that is an addition to an “extendable life” offer it originally had established for this product.

“We are confident that #19 is the last chair anyone will ever want to own,” said Julie Zielinski, Allsteel vice president, marketing. “But, we want our customers to be aware that we have made a commitment to this product and we accept our environmental responsibility. So, we are planning ahead, and letting them know they can rely on us to take it back when, and if, they’re ready.”



It's Easy Being Green

Despite these creative innovations, furniture isn't the only thing in America's offices that's getting greener. Many desktop products – from file folders and memo pads to refillable pens and mechanical pencils – are also made from recycled content. These items made from recycled content generally are manufactured using less energy and water and have a significant impact on the environment.

And when it comes to office lighting, we certainly have learned to be more efficient. The commonly used compact fluorescent lamp (CFL) lasts up to 10-13 times longer than standard bulb and results in dramatic energy savings – often up to 75 percent, while still offering the same light as the higher watt incandescent lamps being replaced.

With all these environmentally responsible options today, there's no reason why your company's office – or even your home office – couldn't get a little greener.