

Furniture's Second Life

Explore Options Before Discarding



Melissa St. John

When it comes to the mantra, “reduce, reuse, recycle,” how many are considering this concept in the workplace? When thinking of items that can be used again, thoughts typically go to consumer-related items like plastic, glass, paper and cardboard.

Often overlooked are the more permanent parts of our workspaces – the chairs, desks, filing cabinets and other furnishings that surround us. In fact, the United States Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 9 million tons of office furniture is going to landfills annually in the U.S.

Imagine a handful of corporations purchasing hundreds of pieces of new furniture, only to throw the old away in a dumpster. In other areas, those same companies might consider themselves green and sustainable. But a standard work cubicle represents 300 to 700 pounds of waste, primarily wood and metal.

It's not that you need to hold onto old furniture. That's not the message. In my 25 years of corporate-move management, I know the office environment is key to employee retention, business development and setting the stage for company culture. But companies can and should do a better job of dealing with their castoffs.

Helping those in need

I recently visited a public agency and was shocked by the dilapidated, decades-old chair at the front desk. This is a piece of furniture an employee sits on all day long, five days a week. Contrast this chair with the newer furniture often relegated to the trash during a corporate office upgrade. For many organizations that can't afford brand new furniture, donated items can be a vast improvement.

Repurposing items just makes good financial sense. It saves the recipient organization money and helps protect the environment. My firm, Relocation Strategies, has assisted with the reallocation of existing furniture to

new spaces by playing matchmaker, connecting start-ups or not-for-profits that need furniture with companies on the verge of throwing theirs away.

One of our clients, a large law firm, was purchasing new furniture and contacted us to assist in the transition. We matched the used furniture the law firm was about to discard with not-for-profits that needed it – at no cost to the not-for-profit. An autism center was one of the beneficiaries and organization leaders said it saved their budget to allow them to do more for the children. It was a win-win for those involved – and a win for the environment. One government entity received donated furniture that resulted in a savings of \$500,000. This was a benefit to employees and a win for taxpayers.

New approach

In other cases, furniture can be reused within the same company. One firm we worked with needed to fit an additional 20 employees into its space. The initial approach was to throw the furniture away and move to a new location. After company officials reviewed their options and surveyed their employees, we understood what type of work environment would help the organization be most productive.

We re-planned their space, updated their cubicles without a trip to the landfill, turned their desks into more modern sit/stand desks and fit the 20 new employees comfortably in the existing space.

The saying “One person's trash is another person's treasure” holds true with office furniture. Reusing it is the green, sustainable and the right thing to do.

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