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## Office furniture is as much about culture as comfort

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When Communispace Corp. had a chance to double its footprint in Watertown, it had a few requirements for what the space and the office furnishings in it would do.

“The collaborative nature of the workplace and the look and feel of the space is one of the key differentiators for us and one of the things that makes it a great place to work,” said Gary Arena, the firm’s chief financial officer.

After a competitive vetting process that started with four furniture dealers, Communispace chose Environments at Work, a three-year-old Boston firm, to outfit the space, which is dominated by a single open floor — no one at the firm has an office — as well as small and large meeting spaces.

“We had a budget and we wanted to get the same energy as we had in the existing space,” Arena added. “From the very beginning when they first came out to meet with us, they heard what we wanted and the end results is what we got what we were looking for.”

Most companies buy office furniture in conjunction with a move to a new location or when they are experiencing a growth spurt that requires adding employees. In those cases, a furniture dealer often becomes part of a team along with architects and interior designers, said Ken Patrick, the president and co-founder of Environments at Work, whose other clients include Raytheon, TJX Corp. and Massachusetts General Hospital.

In any situation, though, a furniture dealer can act as much as a consultant and adviser as a salesperson, helping a business to evaluate its needs and weigh its options. In most cases, Patrick noted, large-scale office furniture purchases are made-to-order and include a significant amount of customization to meet the specific needs of the buyer’s space.

“If someone is looking to make the most of their purchase, they want what they choose to help enhance employee culture and show they care about their workers and to have the furniture and the space help represent what they’re all about,” he said.

With everyone from information technology departments to CEOs having a vested interest in how an office looks and operates — and with most businesses hoping to

complete a move over a weekend to avoid disrupting operations — the process can be a complex one.

“Most businesses only have to go through the process once every five years, so the chances of them having the right mix of expertise in-house is very slim,” Patrick added.

Some companies do experience sticker shock if they haven’t bought office furnishing for a while, but manufacturers have managed to keep prices just about steady over recent years, Patrick said.

The best office furniture shopping experiences start with figuring out what makes a business tick, said Janet Morra, a principal with Boston-based Margulies Perruzzi Architects Inc.

Answering questions — such as whether employees work individually or need more collaborative space, how and where meetings are held and how technology in an office might change — are all important things to sort out early on.

Morra said more businesses are choosing smaller personal workspaces and larger collaboration areas, a move made possible by the rise of portable computers and flat-screen monitors.

In new or retrofitted space, architects and designers can help a business pinpoint how its furniture selections will accentuate and not detract from the aesthetics of any given space. They can also help a business maximize the space they have available, often a geometric challenge given the unusual shape of some of the older buildings in Boston. Furniture also has to be chosen that can accommodate the technology being used in an office, which is often a moving target to try to hit.

“Furniture has to be functional and it has to last—it gets a lot of wear and tear from employees. But if it’s chosen right, it can also enhance a company’s image and its culture,” Morra said.