237 CRESCENT ROAD, SUITE 4
SAN ANSELMO, CA 94960
T: 415.485.1196
F: 415.485.1192
WWW.DOVETAILDCI.COM

# SYSTEMS FURNITURE – WHAT'S THERE TO THINK ABOUT?

There's a reason they don't call them cubicles anymore...

Over 4 decades ago, the open office environment took hold in the United States, forever changing both the atmosphere and culture of almost every organization. Since that time, hundreds of manufacturers have ventured into this marketplace, each claiming a "better mouse trap". Some significant improvements occurred over the years, including electrification, removable elements or "skins", panel hung components, and a new favorite, the ability to add load bearing height to an existing frame. Coupled with this invention, the science of ergonomics has also burgeoned. Many papers have been written about the importance of panel systems in helping to reduce incidence of workplace injuries, and we are not trying to recreate that wheel. However, as systems products have became more and more ubiquitous in the workplace, it has gotten even more confusing as to how to effectively evaluate and select the right tool for your institution.

Today's panel systems are the 'new math' of furniture (with the price tags to match). With that, making the right choice for your organization or project is ever so important, and will require a 'new school' approach.

### Defining Form and Function

Let's begin with what a panel system (also known as "workstations") should be able to do for their owner. Beyond the obvious divisions of space, panel systems define the physical confines of a worker's territory. The products become an indispensible tool in how someone does their job, carrying power and data cables to keep them connected to their technology, giving them use of the space above their heads with storage and lighting, and providing work surface space to support their writing and organizational needs. Viewed from this limited context, pretty much any system product could provide a worthwhile solution. Some manufacturers market specifically to these simpler criteria, hoping to attract clients with initial purchase price and "inclusivity" as the leading factors that they should consider. But these products should be able to help lower the cost of ownership in several areas, from user interaction to reuse *over time*. The good news is there really are systems out there that will be your perfect form and function fit – you just need to know how to ask for it.

The beauty of the modern day workstation is far deeper than aesthetic. The great ones are meant to be the answer to our dynamic, ever-changing environments, functions and work styles. Today, panel systems can have a huge impact on costs associated with change.

237 CRESCENT ROAD, SUITE 4
SAN ANSELMO, CA 94960
T: 415.485.1196
F: 415.485.1192
WWW.DOVETAILDCI.COM

# About Those Bells and Whistles

How many times have you heard the phrase "It does everything but brew your coffee..."? Needs for those bells and whistles will vary by department and position, and you may or may not wish to standardize the menus within your organization. The one that is universal, however, impacts the lifeblood of today's productivity; Technology. When the organization requires a different configuration for the workstations, the IT staff is often consulted prior to reconfiguration about the best way to address the cabling requirements. Yet once the stations are in place (and we know that they often stay put for years on end), it is the IT staff who must manage the birds nest of cables and wires within someone's station. If the panel does not allow for cables to be "laid-in", therefore not requiring any "fishing", a staff person might have to spend as much as 20 additional minutes getting behind files, accessing panel cavities, and feeding each cable through the panel frames. Multiply that by the number of workstations and the hourly rate that the organization pays for this staff member, factor in the downtime in productivity, and you have a significant cost increase.

Adaptability to changes in technology is critical to the bells and whistles package. Consult your IT team when evaluating features from the perspective of (ease of adopting) potential changes and equipment advances. Their role in the set up and integration of these changes and advances to and within the panel system is virtually inevitable, and while some products address this inherently, others may either require upgrades or fall short on the solution altogether.

And finally, the cost to reconfigure a work station is where the real money is — it can be said that the cheaper the product at the on-set, the more expensive it is to reconfigure! The miscellaneous parts necessary to make new configurations are often overlooked in the initial selection process. If those parts are susceptible to breaking, or if the existing parts are not compatible (universal) to design changes, not only could it increase your overall costs, but it can also create additional delays for completing the project.

Will you possibly need to increase privacy, storage or organizational tools in the future? Will footprints increase, decrease, sub-divide? Will workflow traffic patterns change as the department and technology evolves? This impacts on-going ownership costs (also known as Total Cost of Ownership, or TCO) in the cost of the new product, the labor to remove/replace the original parts, and the storage or depreciation of the unnecessary product.

When evaluating the product lines, have the vendor(s) present a mock up and live reconfiguration of a typical workstation. In addition, have them provide a parts list with

237 CRESCENT ROAD, SUITE 4
SAN ANSELMO, CA 94960
T. 415.485.1196
P. 415.485.1192
WWW.DOVETAILDCI.COM

associated costs. When comparing, factor in time to reconfigure (=user downtime), durability of existing parts, cost of new parts, and professional labor fees.

#### The Real Cost

The real costs for panel systems come in the ownership of the components and panels themselves over their 30+ year lifecycle. In most organizations, there is a wide variety of employee sizes, work responsibilities and time spent in the workstation. Many panel system product lines offer what appears to be a wide range of options to allow for user flexibility, yet when the project is specified (or as is common in publicly-funded projects, put to competitive bid) the first cost of the investment is the main decision point, driving what future capabilities will (or will not) be available. From the perspective of the end user, making changes to the workstation become limited to moving small components themselves. If they can not instantly and safely make these chances themselves, an organization can experience increased labor costs, reduced productivity, and possible worker's compensation claims for injuries. Another common issue is for those employees who are shorter or taller than the "typical" 5'7" height (which is well accommodated by a 29"H panel hung work surface), they often end up calling Facilities for assistance to raise or lower a surface, again increasing the costs associated with owning the panel system products.

User-adjustability increases and supports the incorporation of ergonomic correctness and minimizes M&O staff work orders (thereby minimizing internal costs). A workstation that "fits" the user is a safety as well as a productivity consideration.

There are several other real life examples of how panel systems can end up draining your operational budget over time, but hopefully you see the importance of making a decision based upon practical terms.

## Champion the Cause

While panel systems can lend an important aspect to your aesthetic environment, how they perform is the key to systemic happiness. Creating selection criteria based upon the defined performance objectives of the college or district before attempting an evaluation is paramount. In order to define what those criteria should be, it is recommended that you do some financial analysis of how your current panel system (if applicable) adds to your costs. Since these are often paid for through a wide variety of funds, it is important to combine all line items into one format (Operations, Facilities, Risk Management, IT, etc.). While it is challenging to assign a cost to the loss of productivity, management should be able to help with this information. By combining all of this data, as well as a list of "lessons"

237 CRESCENT ROAD, SUITE 4
SAN ANSELMO, CA 94960
T. 415.485.1196
F. 415.485.1192
WWW.DOVETAILDCI.COM

learned" from the internal support teams who keep your facility functioning, you have the beginnings of a process from which to select a product.

Even more challenging in a shared governance environment is guiding a disparate group of individuals to effectively evaluate and select a product line which will address the issues identified. Each group comes to the table with both a focused and limited perspective, which is sometimes influenced by campus politics, overwhelming work responsibilities, or other intangible issues. When operating this framework, selection criteria might be reduced to the simplest aspects (aesthetics, marketing materials, discount off list price, and so on). In order to keep the team moving toward developing criteria that truly matters to the organization as a whole, it is imperative to keep present in the discussion all of the real business issues identified during the research phase. These then frame the way that the product or vendors are evaluated by the "untrained" participants, leaving them less vulnerable to being swayed by appearance, a great pitch, or a sense of overwhelm. It is imperative to have a driving force who can marshal all of the relevant information and help keep the group on the objective track.

The selection criteria for the product itself should include aspects of initial performance, user flexibility, technology interface, future capability, cost of ownership throughout the product's lifecycle, as well as the desired aspects of sustainability.

In many instances, participants change through a process, so *documenting* the selection criteria and the business reasons supporting those requirements, is a crucial aspect of this process. Helping the new players to learn how the overall TCO impacts their role within the institution is a valuable best practice toward creating even more champions for your organization's future.

Proactively analyze the unique issues that relate to the workstations in your environment, then develop a list of "must perform as" (criteria). Do this *before* you start shopping and provide this list to your selection team for guidance – or better yet, adopt in to your QC standards. Engage an independent consultant if you need, but there is no underestimating the value of this step.

Purchasing vehicles that effectively incorporate these principles are available through CollegeBuys.

###