



It's enough to make you sit up and think...and then think again

by Bob Panitzki, CEO Furntech-AFRDI

Browsing the pages of *The Age* recently, I saw an article that should encourage a certain amount of discussion in our industry. Provocatively, it was entitled 'Beware of the Chair'. The opening was even sharper, proposing that the 'upholstered, height adjustable office chair should be labeled a weapon of mass destruction.'

The article quoted studies suggesting that sitting for prolonged periods is supposedly linked to an increased risk of premature death, particularly from cardiovascular disease. It could also be associated with increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes and cancer.

The article also suggested that while the effects of sitting could be mitigated by jogging or other exercise, sitting for prolonged periods appeared to be a health hazard in itself, in much the same way as smoking.

In the United States, Steelcase has introduced the Steelcase Walkstation, a device at which a worker may stand while computing, all the while walking at a sedate pace to keep the muscles moving – the mere fact of movement itself thought to be an important long-term health factor, as it prompts the burning of fat. Stationary bicycles also are being trialed, but in most cases rejected, if only for the relatively huge amount of office space they take up.

In the short term, it seems that the advice that's been around for years – stand up to take phone calls, move about on your chair, and get up for a quick stroll – may well be part of the answer to the exercise deficit for office workers.

Turning a problem into a positive

There's been a great deal said lately about the issue of quality control in the motor industry. I notice that many 'experts' have been having their say, and some of the broad comment is quite good advice for dealing with problems in business management.

First, if a problem exists, face the problem, admit it exists, and fix it. Second, if the problem is big enough, get a crisis team together to solve it. Third, dig down for the root cause. Fourth, get ready for a long haul to recovery, as any lost reputation will take time to recover.

I note in particular the comments of Professor William George, a professor of management practice at the Harvard Business School.

"Never waste a good crisis," he says. "It provides a unique opportunity to make fundamental changes required to restore the company's reputation for quality."

AFRDI IS DISCOUNTING

Actually, we have offered limited discounts for some time, but we feel it's time to give clear examples of just how much our clients can now save by working the system.

Working the system is a phrase that's often taken as a negative, but here I feel that there is a real benefit for everyone. We, that is AFRDI, get the benefit of your membership fee to help with our ongoing research, and you the client, get a substantial discount on volume testing, and your membership fee is effectively paid back to you with a bonus.

You probably will have already received a memo from Standards Officer Robert Johnston, but you should be aware that we are currently re-examining the standard for workstations. Your input is invited. Our new rated loads standard is about to hit the deck, and people are just starting to realise the very real commercial advantages that flow from having products tested and certified to both the AFRDI Blue Tick and the AFRDI Green Tick.

So, like any other business that needs to know where its next dollar is coming from, we have been for some time offering discounts to encourage greater use of our testing facilities. Read the case studies on the webpage www.furntech.org.au (under membership).

AFRDI Green Tick scheme recognised by GBCA

Furntech-AFRDI has been recognised by the Green Building Council of Australia (GBCA) as an accredited third party certifier.

AFRDI 150 Sustainability Standard for Commercial Furniture and its associated certification scheme have been a significant body of work undertaken by Furntech-AFRDI in response to industry demand for an industry-specific approach to sustainability.

CEO Bob Panitzki says: "Our clients are very keen to move forward, and have their products submitted for AFRDI Green Tick Certification, along with gaining Green Star recognition."



US investigates possible furnishing dumping by China

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Commerce has identified 170 Chinese bedroom producers whose 2009 shipments will be the target of the next administrative review of anti-dumping duties.

The review occurs each year on the anniversary date of the 2005 anti-dumping order.

The companies listed will have their shipments audited to determine whether they warrant any change in the duties they were assigned on wood bedroom furniture shipments for calendar year 2009.

The audit will determine to what extent the pricing on these products warrants a higher or lower duty rate. Any increase or decrease in the rates would be paid by or refunded to the importers of record from these factories.

The DOC said it intends to issue the final results of the review no later than January 31, 2011.

Australian Free Trade with China

Free trade discussions between Australia and China resumed in February this year after a hiatus of several years, due mainly to industry concerns about possible dumping and loss of local employment.

Australia exported \$A 39 billion worth of products to China last financial year, with iron ore and other concentrates making up the lion's share, followed by coal and wool. In return, Australia imported large amounts of clothing, telecommunications equipment and computers.

The Furnishing Industry of Australia (FIAA) opposes a Free Trade Agreement with China. The FIAA considers that the value of the Australian industry has been under-estimated by the Australian government in protracted negotiations with the Chinese, because furniture has apparently been 'lumped in' with the textile, clothing and footwear (TCF) industries. (Source : FIAA report on anti-dumping)

The concern is that the TCF sector has been in decline for several decades, while furnishing remains a relatively vibrant local manufacturer, directly employing upwards of 70-thousand people in Australia and 10-thousand in New Zealand.

Moreover, the FIAA is concerned that since the US introduced anti-dumping laws, Australia has been targeted by the Chinese to land imports below cost to gain market penetration.

In terms of the 'level playing field', the FIAA identifies the following on-costs in the Australian workplace which generally do not apply in China:

- Superannuation
- Annual, sick leave, maternity leave and long service leave
- Overtime
- Work cover premiums
- OH&S considerations, and
- Employment costs associated with recruitment and training

ACCC gives yet another warning on bunk beds

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has again pointed to the high number of injuries to children caused by either poor design or build quality in bunk beds.

The ACCC claims that at least 3,800 bunk bed related injuries occur each year to children under the age of 15. These injuries require treatment by hospital emergency departments or general practitioners, and in fact are one of the most common causes of injury to young people.

Frequently occurring faults include too large a gap for entry into upper level bunks, making it easy for a child to fall out. Large gaps in the guard rails often pose an entrapment hazard.

ACCC deputy chairman Peter Kell said importers and retailers must be confident that the manufacturer they work with will maintain constant vigilance over quality control on their production lines.

They should also check to ensure that the products they received were consistent with those ordered, Mr Kell added.

"If a supplier cannot be sure that every finished product matches the design of the product initially tested, they either need to improve quality control or change the design to ensure that possible manufacturing variations do not make the finished products unsafe."

The mandatory standard for bunk beds provides a requirement for top bunks to have guard rails to prevent falls and also provides specific allowable measurements for protrusions and gaps in the bunk, all designed to help ensure that strangulation and entrapment hazards are not created.

Online traders told to shape up on returns and warranties

The ACCC has again warned online traders who misrepresent consumers' rights concerning warranties and refunds.

Chairman Graeme Samuel said that fundamentally, consumers had the same rights online as if they walked into a store.

"Basically, they can expect that a product would have a level of quality and performance that would be reasonable to expect, do what it is meant to do and match its description," Mr Samuel said.

He added that if it became necessary for faulty goods to be returned to the place of purchase, the ACCC considered it reasonable for the seller to pay appropriate freight costs.

"Online traders should be aware that the ACCC reviews websites regularly, and will consider action where remedial work is not quickly undertaken," Mr Samuel said.

The super-sizing revolution rolls on in the United States

OK, super-sizing refers to the fast food industry...but it's possibly the industry that's most helped to create the market for plus-size furniture!

The Los Angeles Times reported recently about the need for what it called 'the sitting-in-chairs public' to have bigger than standard chairs in many cases, just to hold them comfortably.

But it's not the size of potential occupants that's influencing furniture size – it's the size of their homes as well. Few manufacturers openly flaunt this larger than normal furniture, but rely on subtle advertising – bench dining seats for people who can't fit in a normal dining chair, for example.

There's also the coy adverts for mother and daughter chairs, ostensibly so that the two can sit together in close company – in reality often a chair for those for whom a standard chair would be too tight.

One company has even introduced a Plus Size Living Collection, including a cloth chair it claims can safely hold someone weighing 800 pounds (360 kg).

Not only are chairs becoming larger – they are also being produced in higher sizes, as humans grow taller along with gains in girth.

Just how much this trend is developing is illustrated in the following statistic: in 1960, 46% of Americans aged from 20 to 74 were judged obese. Four years ago, that figure had increased to 73% being considered obese.

Is there a similar problem in Australasia? Diabetes Australia currently estimates 62% of adults are obese. Of even greater concern is the fact that the obesity rate in boys has doubled in the last few years.

According to Diabetes Australia, you're overweight if your Body Mass Index (BMI) lies between 25 and 30, obese if the BMI tops 30. Obesity brings risks of diabetes and heart disease.

It's of interest that the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which used a sample size of 22,000, found that only 56% of adults considered themselves overweight.

At AFRDI, we're about to introduce new rated load measurements testing height adjustable office chairs up to 160 kg, and fixed height chairs up to 210 kg. We know some manufacturers market chairs with higher ratings, but we've tested very few such product to verify these claims.

Camping chairs

We live in a country where many of us spend quite a bit of our leisure time outdoors where, of course, we frequently sit down. So it's perhaps logical that AFRDI plans to test some popular lightweight folding chairs before next summer.

Some carry quite ambitious load rating claims which one can only assume have some validity, allowing for the laws of advertising. The matter of durability however may prove to be a more difficult question, with anecdotal evidence of relatively frequent chair failure.

Perhaps there's an assumption that such chairs are to be used for a summer season, and then discarded. We'll let you know.

NEWS BRIEFS

In 2009 manufacturers of solid wood furniture outpaced the rest of the furniture industry in Germany.

According to a survey, turnover generated by manufacturers of solid wood furniture rose almost 5 percent on average. Germany remains the leading purchaser of furniture in Europe.

Exports of furniture from China have fallen as a result of the global financial crisis.

China has been concentrating instead on growing its domestic market for the time being. At the same time, China's reliance on timber imports is increasing steadily, as the local industry cannot maintain pace with growth in the furniture and housing industries.

The Indonesian Furniture Entrepreneurs Association (ASMINDO) is optimistic that the country's furniture industry could compete with China, using quality as its selling point.

To be able to compete with China, local furniture makers are starting to cooperate with real estate parties, apartment owners and production houses in promoting Indonesian-made furniture.

In the US, the Consumer Product Safety Commission has considerably increased penalties for infringements against consumer safety.

The maximum penalty for individual violations increases from \$8,000 to \$100,000, while the penalty for a series of violations increases to a maximum of \$15 million.

Furniture manufacturers in Mississippi are to get a \$2,000 tax credit for each new cut-and-sew job they create.

The local industry and political leaders are said to be pleased that the incentive has been approved.

As China continues to raise its standard of living, and along with it, manufacturing costs, Samson Holding, parent of the major case goods company Lacquer Craft, is establishing a major new plant in Bangladesh.

Samson also is establishing a sawmill in South-East Asia to supply plantation grown hardwoods to the new factory. The company freely admits that since furniture manufacturing is a relatively new industry in Bangladesh, it expects to take some time to train workers and to establish a supply chain.

Sustainability taking off slowly in the United States, but most in survey find it necessary to pursue

A major business study in the United States has found that sustainability is having a material impact on how companies think and act.

And in what may come as a surprise to many in business, the focus on the need for sustainable practices is surviving the economic downturn.

The findings are quoted in the MIT Sloan Management Review.

Amongst other things, the survey found that a majority of companies interviewed were not acting decisively to exploit opportunities becoming available through the pursuit of sustainable practices. Further, the greater part of actions taken were to meet perceived regulatory requirements, rather than through a process of self-realisation of opportunities.

Specifically, 70 per cent of interviewees admitted that their company had not yet developed a clear business case for sustainability.

A small number of companies, however, were said to be acting aggressively on sustainability, and reaping substantial rewards.

In summary, the study found that sustainability will become increasingly important to business strategy and management over time, with the risks of failing to act decisively. It also pointed to a need to develop a culture that rewards and encourages long-term thinking, capabilities in the areas of activity measurement, process redesign, financial modeling and reporting, and skills in engaging communicating with external stakeholders.

Green ticket for wood products

In an effort to gain consumer confidence, users of plywood and panel products are now green ticketing their materials to indicate that they have been independently tested and certified for low formaldehyde emissions, and are sourced from sustainable and renewable forests.

Initiated by the Engineered Wood Products Association of Australasia (EWPA), the ticketing scheme is now gaining traction.

A major part of the scheme is to counteract increasing imports of plywood, flat pack shelving and furniture components from Asia, particularly as these components are said to be consistently failing standards for formaldehyde emissions.

An increasingly positive global economic outlook coupled with strong demand in the housing sector is expected to place pressure on world supplies of MDF over the next three to four years.

According to a report by BIS Shrapnel, production is continuing to shift from North America and Europe to China and Asia. It's a trend strengthened by the effects of the global financial crisis, which is limiting new plant investment in traditional centres.

Consumption of MDF is expected to grow at a rate of five per cent a year. The report notes that while China and Asia are becoming the major manufacturing centres, they're under pressure from a raw resources standpoint.

Joyce Foam has consolidated its Western Sydney manufacturing operations, in a move supported by the NSW state government.

State minister for Regional Development, Ian Macdonald, said the government had stepped in to secure the consolidation project to maintain local employment. The move secures 64 jobs, with another five to be created. Joyce plans to expand the Moorebank base into its national manufacturing headquarters.

New AFRDI Standard 142 identifies office chairs rated for heavy people

Rapid changes in human sizing and body mass over the past four decades, often popularly referred to as the obesity crisis, are considered in a new standard, AFRDI Standard 142, Office Chairs for Heavy People. A similar standard, AFRDI 151, will consider fixed height chairs under a rated load schedule extending to 210 kilos.

Meeting a frequently requested demand to scientifically test height adjustable office chairs to cope with loads outside the nominal 110 kilo (17 stone) limit adopted by AFRDI as its interpretation of the existing standard, AS/NZS 4438:1997, the new standard recognizes that the 110 kilo figure is now considered to be too low for some applications.

It puts heavy duty chairs in two categories, those tested to 135 kilos (21 stone), and those with an upper limit of 160 kilos (25 stone). Sub sections cover single and multi-shift uses.

AFRDI technical manager, Ian Burton, who authored the new standard, points out that it is not intended for every chair – in reality only a small percentage of the population needs a chair load rated outside the existing standard.



"The project has two principal aims," Ian says. "One is to devise testing regimes which will necessitate manufacturers to create a genuinely superior chair to successfully pass, and in doing so, to produce a chair which is mechanically safe for heavy people to use.

"The other aim is to give confidence to specifiers and architects. It's about minimising exposure to potential liability claims should a chair fail when subjected to heavy loads.

"The last thing we want to see is this heavy load rating becoming the new de facto standard for office chairs. The performance level it sets is simply not required for most chairs."

As with existing AFRDI testing regimes, the Rated Load Standard commands a battery of tests for strength and durability, designed to identify strength in complete chairs.

To justify the higher price of extended testing, AFRDI is suggesting that manufacturers with qualifying chairs should be confident of offering at least a seven year warranty for single shift (standard duty) chairs, and 10 years for multi-shift (heavy duty) chairs.

In line with recent practice, AFRDI will offer substantial discounts on full testing when three or more similar chairs are submitted for full testing at the same time. Conversely, AFRDI expects manufacturers will be able to command a substantial price premium for chairs tested and certified at the new levels.

New AFRDI standards will influence office fitout

Changing expectations for the performance of office space, changes in the way humans work in the office environment, changes indeed in the size of humans – these are some of the factors influencing the production of a new AFRDI industry standard for desking systems and workstations.

The existing standards covering these areas – AS/NZS 4442:1997 and AS/NZS 4443:1997 – were published 13 years ago, and even then contained many legacy considerations referencing an earlier era of business. The new AFRDI industry standard will establish parameters to assist manufacturers faced with the practical question of how to manufacture four conjoined workstations for, say, \$2,000, versus an earlier generation average of \$1200 for a single place, yet still maintain structural integrity, the ability to group workstations together – in some cases omitting legs shared in common: in short, advice on the entire question of maintaining quality and durability.

While the process of producing a new broad industry standard is still in its early stages, AFRDI is actively considering another AFRDI standard just to cover surface finishes for workstations, so numerous are the options available.

Seminars on Rated Loads in Melbourne and Sydney well attended

In late April, AFRDI rolled out the draft versions of AFRDI Standards 142 and 151 to invited audiences of manufacturers and suppliers in Sydney and Melbourne. Both standards use a rated loads approach to safely assess chairs for heavy people, 142 covers office swivel chairs, and 151 fixed height chairs.



AFRDI deputy chairman Mark Copperwaite (at left) chaired both sessions, which featured lengthy and vibrant discussions.

The Standard causing the most interest, 142, takes testing of office swivel chairs to two new points, 135 kg and 160 kg, a considerable increase over the nominal 110 kg testing point in AS/NZS 4438 (see story page 5). The increased loading is seen as necessary to enable architects, specifiers, builders and professionals charged with building fitout to safely specify chairs for the relatively small segment of the population which needs heavy duty chairs. AFRDI 142 includes testing at the single shift operational level, and also to meet the more rigorous needs of a multi-shift environment.

AFRDI 151 for fixed height chairs brings testing at four new points ranging from 135 kg through to 210 kg.

Questions centred on three key points:

- A request for a summary sheet to guide manufacturing prior to formal submission to AFRDI for testing
- A clarification of the certification mark to denote that a chair has been tested to the new standard(s)
- Details of AFRDI's marketing strategy for the new standards, and their separation from testing to AS/NZS 4438

AFRDI started receiving orders for testing under the new standards in May, and is now commencing testing, after having privately tested a number of randomly donated chairs to assess their performance under the new regimes.

As deputy chairman of the AFRDI board, Mark Copperwaite, told the seminars, the new standards will apply to something less than 10% of the number of chairs tested. In reply to claims from the meetings that the new standards would effectively become Blue Tick Level 7 and 8, Mark said that this would be a matter for the market to decide. But he added that at present, it was AFRDI's intention to concentrate its mainstream testing and certification efforts on AS/NZS 4438 and its associated Blue Tick program.

Of interest at the Sydney meeting were claims that the new upper testing limit would not cope with actual market demand, and that 180 kg would be a more realistic level. However, a show of hands revealed that only 20% of the audience felt such an elevated level was necessary.

Issues arising from the seminars have been referred to the AFRDI board for further consideration.

The board will also set an introduction date for AFRDI 151 and likely pricing structures based on the additional testing time needed to accommodate the new standard.



New funds for AFRDI : creating jobs and securing future work



AFRDI has secured funding under the TasRAP program, which seeks to compensate Tasmanian regions hard hit through economic restructuring and the ensuing industry downturn. AFRDI operates from Launceston, a city which has suffered considerable employment loss in manufacturing industry over more than three decades, with further cutbacks in the current global financial crisis.

The funds will be used to complete design drawings for a chair testing device, and to have the machine manufactured in Northern Tasmania, and to draw up plans for a chair measuring device. This machine also will be locally built.

AFRDI has already engaged a designer to work on plans for the machines, while drawing on the considerable experience AFRDI personnel have accumulated through operation of the existing bank of testing devices.

AFRDI CEO Bob Panitzki (centre) and technical manager Ian Burton (left) recently signed funding documentation with Derek LeMarchant, from the Tasmanian Department of Economic Development. The funding is a joint State and Commonwealth initiative.

Derek LeMarchant said he was pleased to learn that funding would not only benefit the local economy of Northern Tasmania, but would also help to strengthen the position of the national furnishing industry as well through additional testing and certification work AFRDI will be able to do.

AFRDI's Lee Bowkett further explains: "I'm concerned that some suppliers with Furntech-AFRDI Orange Tick Certification are confusing the release of the new edition of AS/NZS 4220 with a new edition of the Bunk Consumer Protection Notice, i.e. the mandatory regulation.

"Only AS/NZS 4220 has been modified, not the mandatory regulation. Therefore bunks that are Furntech-AFRDI Orange Tick Certified don't require further testing at present, because the mandatory regulation has not been modified yet. Furntech-AFRDI will notify Orange Tick Certification holders if and when a new bunk mandatory regulation is released and if further testing is required."

New Standard for bunk beds introduced

AFRDI is testing to a new standard for bunk beds, *AS/NZS 4220:2010 (Bunkbeds and other elevated beds)* which, while similar to the 2003 version of the standard, contains a number of significant differences.

AFRDI has published a brief description of the standard on its website (www.furntech.org.au), in an effort to reduce apparent confusion over its introduction and future application for testing and certification.

The following are the major objectives for the current revision:

- (a) To increase the minimum vertical distance between the upper surface of the guardrail and the upper surface of the mattress base to a minimum of 360 mm from the 260 mm specified in the 2003 edition.
- (b) To discourage the creation of large gaps in guardrails in order to prevent the inadvertent formation of dangerous smaller gaps that may arise when a mattress is fitted. Of particular concern were gaps formed where the top, outside edge of the mattress forms the bottom edge of an entrapping space.
- (c) To place a maximum limit on the number of permissible access openings in guardrails.
- (d) To expand and improve the section on climbing access.
- (e) To reduce from 800 mm to 700 mm the maximum height above the floor of the upper surface of the mattress base, i.e. the minimum height at which the provisions of this Standard apply.
- (f) To increase the severity of load testing of guardrails, and
- (g) To improve both the accuracy and clarity of the figures used in the Standard.

 Continued

Is there a lesson in the launch of Apple's iPad for the Australian furnishing industry?

Over the past few months, there's been a lot of talk predicting the end of the book as we know it, first with the introduction of Amazon's Kindle, and now Apple's iPad – both of them electronic tablet format screen-based readers.

The question that's being posed is, does the introduction of these new technologies mean that traditional printing has had its day, and will there be a flow-on in this line of thinking to other long-established industries?

Once we get over the initial shock that comes with the possible end of a technology that's endured for many centuries, we should perhaps reflect on some of the reasons why the change is occurring.

In a recent article in the Harvard Business Review, the author raised the point that industry sometimes makes assumptions about customer behaviour that are based on past experience and may no longer be true. There are numerous examples to support this line of thinking – no-frills airlines came into being largely because someone in the industry took the trouble to find out what certain customers actually wanted, instead of the airlines driving the product offering.

In a similar fashion, worldwide you will now find a chain of hotels that offers accommodation in larger than normal, often family-oriented suites, in recognition that some clientele want to stay for more than a night or two, and have with them family and even friends.

The message in the Harvard article is clear: woe betide the businesses unwilling to let go of their legacies and embrace evolving customer behaviour.

The article gives an example of the type of company which meets this description – Kodak. The company was king of the photographic industry right through to the mid-90s with its film and printing services, but then failed to adapt to the public's preference for the convenience and immediacy of the then-emerging digital media.

To me, the question that now needs to be posed is, is there room for further evolution in our industry? In recent times in these columns, I have talked at length about the need to adopt sustainability principles. It's a topic that requires a fundamental rethink of the way we go about many tasks, and by rights, it should have started a process involving a wider examination of the way we do things, and where we source materials.

For example, and here I'm perhaps being just a little flippant, do we ever go out into the office furniture marketplace and ask, does the client want a chair that's covered with sheepskin? Why not – it's comfortable, even though it may look a bit out of place in the traditionalist's view of what an office should be.

The underbody of a typical office chair is almost universally finished in a dark colour – might it not be white or a pale colour, to fit the minimalist colour palette used in many modern offices?

What about a settee with a number of individually adjustable seats so that the family can watch TV together, with individual comfort adjustments?

The answer probably is that there would be no market for such niche products, but have we actually asked the question, or do we just essentially keep on making the same products we have made for decades?

I am encouraged that some of the international manufacturers are showing a willingness to exploit various plastics as the main material in much of their chairs, because such chairs often have a significantly greater potential for recycling.

I also looked on with interest recently at the results of some international student design competitions for chairs. Some of the chairs were built entirely from plywood, and simply snapped together using the natural tensioning of the wood to maintain the locking of the components.

Cynics would say that such design cannot be translated to the commercial world – I would counter that this may be true, but the fact there has been a willingness to experiment is a fundamental quality which our industry could profit from.

Our Australasian industry needs on the one hand to provide top quality office and domestic furnishing, quality being the differentiator. The other side of the coin is that we need to live up to our self-appointed motto as being the clever country, and let clever and innovative design be a hallmark of more Australian furnishing, perhaps in addition to the traditional offering.

Going back to the article from the Harvard Business Review, the closing line is a powerful one: "In 2010, many of our businesses continue to operate as if it were 1980. I'm sure if you took a dispassionate and clear-eyed look at your company and the actual behaviour of your customers, you would realise opportunities that have been obscured by legacy thinking."



I can't help feeling there's more than a grain of truth in that statement in the Australian context.