

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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CATALOG CRITIC

## Sitting Pretty Smartly

We Try Out Desk Chairs to See Which Work Best at Home; The Seat-Edge Tilt Factor

By **TROY MCMULLEN** Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Updated Jan. 7, 2005 12:01 a.m. ET

For a recent purchase, Mary McDade perused brochures, visited several showrooms and tested 10 different models. After sorting through exotic-sounding features like "harmonic tilt" and "dual-pivot backrest," she finally came home with a brand-new... desk chair.

Weeks later, the 45-year-old jewelry distributor in Rockford, Ill., says she still hasn't tried some of the adjustments on the new chair for her home office. "They put so much stuff on these things," says Ms. McDade.

If you think setting up the computer for your home office is complicated, try buying the chair. With the number of U.S. home offices up 7.5% last year, furniture makers are rolling out increasingly complex models with arcane ergonomic adjustments and "form-sensing" materials.

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PULL UP A CHAIR

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See how the various **home-office chairs** stacked up.

Herman Miller, known for its high-end Aeron office chair, now sells the Mirra, a less-expensive alternative. The \$895 Freedom chair from Humanscale appears in both office-supply stores and such home-friendly catalogs as Design Within Reach. Ads for

fancy desk chairs are also appearing in Dwell, House Beautiful and other decor magazines.

Makers are eager to get into the home, in part because of a drop-off in business. Overall office-furniture sales fell to \$10 billion in 2003, down from \$15 billion in 2000, according to the Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturers Association. Meanwhile, desk chair sales climbed 6.7% in the same period. Makers know "that the home-office market is growing and they need to be a bigger part of it," says Tom Reardon, director of the trade group.

In search of a chair that would be simple to adjust and would look at home outside a cubicle, we anonymously ordered five models from popular manufacturers. Besides distributing the chairs around our office for test-sits by colleagues, we enlisted the help of Manny Halpern, a professor of ergonomics at New York University's School of Occupational & Industrial Orthopedic Medicine.

Prof. Halpern suggests evaluating chairs on four main criteria: chair adjustments, seat comfort, body support and ease of use. Consumers should settle on a seat that fits their shape and has a comfortable lumbar and backrest, he says. Likewise, armrests should be adjustable and backrests should support the person's weight in different positions.

We started with one of the biggest names in furniture, Herman Miller, which has made pieces by Isamu Noguchi, Alvar Aalto, and Charles and Ray Eames. Herman Miller

knocked the desk-chair world off its casters when it introduced its Aeron model in 1994. Immediately, the high-backed leather throne that had rolled around in executive suites for decades was replaced with a sleek, high-tech model that championed function over form.

### A Sinking Feeling

So our hopes were high for one of the firm's newest offerings, the Mirra, which we ordered with options for \$699. The chair was attractive, but its overall performance was disappointing. The Mirra didn't roll smoothly -- you really had to "push off" to move, complained one of our testers. "There's a sinking feeling here," says Prof. Halpern of the chair's elastic suspension. He also worried that the molded backrest didn't offer enough support for everyday use. Overall, we felt the Mirra sacrificed comfort for style.

Our hopes were also high for Ikea's Verksam chair, but for a different reason. While the Mirra had the pedigree of its maker, the Swedish seat, at \$199, was the value leader. If it could compete with models almost four times its price, it would be a coup. Unfortunately, "you get what you pay for," said Prof. Halpern, who found little to praise on this model. Clunky metal and plastic armrests, cheap-looking cotton upholstery and tiny hard-to-roll casters were all part of the underwhelming experience.

The desk chair isn't just a functional piece of furniture; it has also become a status symbol. Owners of an Aeron chair, for example, can tell colleagues that it has been included in New York's Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. At the same time, high-end chairs have also attracted some negative attention, having become as associated with late-'90s dot-com excess as foosball tables, indoor basketball courts and scooters. New attempts to add some prestige to the desk chair include Steelcase's arrangement with Coach, in which some of the models can come covered in the leather company's colorful hides. Another company, Foamtex, is selling seats from the Concorde that have been converted to desk use (the chairs are for sale at \$10,000 apiece).

The Freedom chair from Humanscale had no glamorous background but did feature easy-to-adjust armrests that allow users to move both simultaneously. That convenience can also be a drawback, however. According to Prof. Halpern, some people may want to set their armrests at different heights (if their mouse is at one level and their phone is at another, for example) -- something you can't do with this \$895 model. Humanscale says that equal support helps prevent long-term injury. Prof. Halpern agreed, but said that "the chair forces the user to adopt good habits, but in my opinion many users will tend to over-compensate for this and begin leaning forward or not using the rests at all."

We moved on to the K-Series from Bodybilt, which cost \$823. The chair moved well in our cubicles and looked fine in the office, though it might look a little too institutional for the home. The K-Series was also difficult to adjust, with levers tucked so far underneath the seat that they were sometimes tough to find and use.

Nothing makes us think of anonymous cubicles more than Steelcase -- even the name has cage-like connotations -- but the company's Leap chair proved to be a surprising and pleasant addition to our home-office lineup. Most chairs left us wondering how to adjust them, but our \$799 model had handy diagrams located under each swiveling armrest. The seat-edge angle control -- which allows users to tilt it forward, taking pressure off your thighs -- was a big hit with Prof. Halpern. Besides being a supremely comfortable chair, the Leap also had a sleek, attractive look as well. At \$799, it wasn't going to take Best Value (and no other chair, it should be said, could), but it's our Best Overall.

**Write to** Troy McMullen at [troy.mcmullen@wsj.com](mailto:troy.mcmullen@wsj.com)

**OfficeDesigns.com**

**Steelcase Leap**

\$799

877-696-3342

**Quality:** *Best Overall.* Came with the most features and adjusted easily.

**Shipping Cost/Time:** Standard shipping is free. Chair arrived in four days.

**Return Policy:** Return within 30 days. You pay shipping unless order is wrong or damaged.

**Phone/Web Experience:** Online ordering was simple. An invoice reply arrived shortly after we ordered.

**Comments:** In addition to onboard diagrams, visitors to the site can watch demonstration videos online that illustrate adjustments.

#### **UltimateBackstore.com**

K-Series by Bodybilt

\$783

888-782-2225

**Quality:** Comfortable and moves well on carpet. Some levers and control knobs were hard to reach..

**Shipping Cost/Time:** Free delivery on standard shipping. Chair arrived five days late.

**Return Policy:** Return within 30 days for refund. You pay shipping unless order is wrong or damaged.

**Phone/Web Experience:** Iffy customer service. We were transferred several times before having to leave a voicemail message.

**Comments:** Site also sells other back-related merchandise like electric massagers, pillows and bed desks.

#### **Design Within Reach**

Humanscale Freedom

\$895

800-944-2233

www.dwr.com

**Quality:** Looks good and balances weight evenly. Synchronous armrests can be uncomfortable.

**Shipping Cost/Time:** We paid \$96.20 for standard shipping. Chair came in three business days.

**Return Policy:** Return within 30 days for refund. You pay shipping unless order is wrong or damaged.

**Phone/Web Experience:** Site is wildly informative, offering multiple views of product, as well as fit and care instructions.

**Comments:** Difficult to get back into its return box. We got grease all over our hands from the casters. Site includes a profile of Niels Difrient, designer of Humanscale's Freedom Chair.

#### **Sit4Less.com**

Mirra by Herman Miller

\$699

877-490-5377

**Quality:** Great-looking chair but lacked comfort. Seat was stiffer than many would have preferred.

**Shipping Cost/Time:** Free delivery on standard shipping. Chair arrived in three days.

**Return Policy:** Return within 30 days. You pay shipping unless order is wrong or damaged.

**Phone/Web Experience:** Cheesy looking Web site design but easy to order.

**Comments:** Sit4Less still sells those "kneeling chairs" that we were told would be the future of seating in the 1980s.

**Ikea**

Verksam chair

\$199

800-434-4532

[www.ikea.com](http://www.ikea.com)

**Quality:** Unattractive and poor quality, though it comes in leather.

**Shipping Cost/Time:** We paid \$36.74 for standard shipping. Chair arrived in seven days.

**Return Policy:** Return within 30 days for refund. You pay shipping unless order is wrong or damaged.

**Phone/Web Experience:** Ordered by phone. Put on hold for about 10 minutes before customer-service agent took our order.

**Comments:** Site requires registration.

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