

Task chairs

If there's one item of office equipment it's worth getting right it's your chair. Most office based staff spend around 1900 hours a year sitting in their chair so it's no surprise that if it isn't right for you it will at best be uncomfortable but more usually actually start to cause you pain and longer term problems. The correct chair to offer support when working at a desk is a task chair – this is the traditional office chair on a 5 star base with castors, rather than a meeting chair which will usually be on 4 legs or a cantilever frame. When buying a task chair though there is a bewildering amount of choice so how do you decide what's best for you?

Use the following guide to find your perfect chair:

Task chairs start at around £70 and go up to nearly £1000. We'll explore why there is such a wide range of price for what on the surface looks like a very similar item below, but spend the most you can afford up to around £300 after which you start to pay more for features you probably won't use and for the brand name that comes with the chair. Below £300 every pound is an investment in your health and comfort so if you can afford it, spend it.

The price of a chair is based on three factors:

a) Quality of components and materials used.

Chairs made from good quality components and materials will have a longer warranty than those that don't. A chair with a year long warranty is mass produced from cheap components and will need replacing in 12-18 months. A chair that carries a 10 year warranty is made from the best materials available and will probably last 15 years. This lifespan needs to be factored in when considering cost. A good tip to check the quality of a chair's mechanism is if the controls of the chair are accessed from the sides of the seat, the mechanism is a good one. If some of the controls (usually the back tension) are under the seat and accessed between the users legs, the mechanism is low quality.

b) Ergonomic features of the chair.

All task chairs will be height adjustable and have a tension control that changes the resistance of the seat back when it reclines. Most will also be able to lock the back in a fixed position or leave it moving when leaned against. After this though there are a huge variety of ergonomic features that may or may not be present. Better chairs will have more and if your budget allows, those that are to be looked for are:

1. Mesh back. Allows better movement and moulds to the shape of your back to give better support. Also has better airflow to keep you cooler when the weather warms up.
2. Lumbar Support. An adjustable insert into the frame of the back that can be moved up and down so it sits perfectly in the small of the back of the user regardless of their height. Support of the lower lumbar region of the back works wonders to prevent back pain developing if using the chair for long periods.
3. Adjustable padded arms. Arms can be just height adjustable, or height and width, or height width and angle. Select the best you can afford as all these features are great when working with a mouse for long periods. Also ensure the arms can drop down low enough so they can go underneath your desktop when required so you don't find yourself sitting uncomfortably far away from your keypad.
4. Thick or memory foam seat pad. Thinner seat pads compress over time and you will start to feel the plastic seat shell through the foam.
5. Synchro mechanism. You'll see this a lot on task chair descriptions but very few people know what it actually means. It means that the seat and back move together when you lean back as opposed to a fixed mechanism where the back moves but the seat stays in the same place. This is much more comfortable for the user. The correct seated position on a task chair is the height to be set so your legs are bent at 90 degrees when your feet are flat on the floor and the small of your back to be touching the seat back (don't perch on the front of the seat) You should also keep the back free moving rather than locked – moving throughout the day even in the seated position is very important. When sitting correctly like this a synchro mechanism helps you maintain this correct position, a fixed back will encourage you out of this position when you lean back.
6. Auto weight adjustment. This feature adjusts the back tension automatically according to the weight of the user. This removes the need for the user to manually twist a lever underneath or to the side of the seat to do this, and also means chairs can be shared more easily in a hot desking situation without the constant need to re-adjust them.
7. Sliding seat. This feature allows the seat to be moved closer or further away from the back rest. The advantage of this is that the user can ensure they can adopt the correct seated posture of having the small of their back in contact with the base of the back rest and maintain a 1-2 inch gap between the inside of their knees and the edge of the seat (which is recommended as if the knees are pushing into the seat, blood flow is restricted) regardless of their size or body shape.

8. Castors. Task chairs always come with hard castors suitable for carpet as standard. Some chairs allow soft castors to be fitted as an option. This is necessary if the chair is to be used on a wood or tiled floor to prevent scratching and the chair slipping on the floor.
9. Weight range. Good task chairs are warranted up to 115kg (18 stone). If you require a chair rated higher than this they are available (with heavy duty gas lifts and foams) but make sure you seek this out if you fall into this category.
10. Height range. A standard office task chair can be adjusted to the correct seated position for users ranging from 4 feet 11 inches to 6 feet 5 inches. If outside of this range look for a specialist chair for petite or tall users.
11. Choice of fabrics. Budget mass produced chairs are available only in a few fixed fabric colours. Entry level chairs up can be specified in a huge range of fabrics and colours to suit your brand or décor. Some chairs have removable seat pads which means you can refresh your office or brand colours without having to buy complete new chairs in different fabrics.

c) The manufacturer who makes it.

Never buy a task chair with less than a 5 year warranty. You don't have to spend very much to get this, and any chair without one is of a quality that if being sat on for long periods simply isn't good enough. Once the chair does have the required 5 year guarantee though there are still a huge amount of options available. Very expensive chairs are often the price they are due to the name of the designer or manufacturer attached to it. It's a little like buying clothes – certain garments are no better quality but are at a premium price for the label. A good office furniture dealer will be able to steer you to the best chair available currently for your budget (and this changes as new chairs are launched or prices change).

One final point is that the above describes good ergonomic seating that will benefit every user. A user with a confirmed medical issue may however need a specialist posturepedic chair to best support their needs. These are both specialised and produced in much lower volumes and so are often far more expensive at over £1000. The best chair in these instances should be recommended following an occupational health assessment of the user's individual requirements.

Quite a lot to consider – but doing so will prevent back pain developing and give you years of working in comfort.

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