

I need office furniture. Where should I buy it from?

So you are setting up, moving or refurbishing your business and new furniture is a key part of your plans. Where to purchase this furniture from though is a bewildering tangle of options, so what's best? The answer rather depends on your specific requirements in terms of budget, look, how much time you have to dedicate to the project and your level of knowledge of office furniture and the regulations that go with it. Here we give an unbiased look at the pros and cons of all the purchasing routes open to you:

The first thing to decide is new or second hand? If you're working to a tight budget used furniture can save you money or you can buy higher quality furniture with your budget than buying new. Used furniture is also eco-friendly as recycling used furniture stretches out its lifespan and keeps items out of landfill sites (although most furniture is now getting close to 100% recyclable so landfill is less of a consideration). You can also usually get used furniture straightaway so if you are working to a tight programme this can speed things along.

The cons though are that used furniture is sold as is, and there is typically no warranty on it. If you purchase furniture and it develops a problem, there's no comeback. Being pre-used it will also need replacing faster than new furniture of the same quality, and if you purchase budget furniture second hand it often doesn't rebuild well as self-tapping fixings weaken everytime they are removed and replaced, causing desks to be unstable. A main factor is a lack of choice in terms of finishes – you have to take the colours and fabrics that are available rather than choose what looks best for your company image and branding, and the fact it will be available in a limited quantity meaning if you expand and want to add furniture later it will be mismatched which will make your business premises look low budget.

The most cost effective way to purchase second hand furniture is directly from the building it is already in and remove it yourself, transport it and rebuild it. Office furniture installation companies will take care of this for you if you don't have the expertise or transport to do it yourself but the removal costs will often offset the savings of buying the furniture new. Equally, if buying from a dealer that has already removed it and will now come and re-install it for you, the costs to do this and store the furniture before you purchased it will often mean the savings you expected aren't as significant as you hoped. The best second hand deal is on higher quality products – here the costs of removal and storage are the same but you get a better product than you could have otherwise afforded.

If having considered the above you feel second hand isn't for you, you need to decide how to buy new furniture.

The first port of call for many, especially start-ups and small businesses is online retailers such as www.officesupermarket.co.uk. These online retailers have a wide choice of ranges many of which are pre-made in a range of finishes ready for 24 hour delivery. This is great for being able to furnish your premises quickly and the costs including delivery are often excellent value. The cons of this method of purchasing is the onus is on you to plan the products into your space and be sure they are going to work. The finishes are also limited so you don't have the choice of fabrics and desktops that buying a made to order product will offer you to totally individualise your office space, and budget end products will typically only be provided with a 1 year warranty and no continuity of supply guarantee so if you need another chair in 6 months time to match it may not be available. You will also be responsible for building the products yourself as they will arrive on pallets, flat packed. If you only require a few desks and chairs this is almost always the most cost effective way to furnish your space, but the limitations are significant if needing a larger quantity of furniture.

Even if you have a willing and able workforce (and even then there are considerations of H&S of expecting them to lift heavy components), any project for over 10 staff really needs some external help both to plan the space and make sure everything you require will fit into your building and to deliver and install your new furniture. Here there are two options – direct to the manufacturer or an independent third party known as a dealer who can supply the products of multiple manufacturers. There is also a third if you are having a complete building fit out rather than just buying or replacing furniture of including the new furniture into the fit out contractor's package.

Let's look at buying from a manufacturer first. Some manufacturers will sell their products direct to end users and by cutting out the dealer (who will of course make their own profit when they sell it on) this can mean products are cheaper to buy. Manufacturers also know their own products extremely well and can answer any questions or requests to have products customised quickly and accurately. They may also invite you to the factory to see their processes and quality controls before your order is finalised, and as your product is built to order the choices of finishes and fabrics will be huge so you can create a truly unique scheme for your business premises. They also have the ability to plan your space for you, often free of charge, and to produce computer generated images to show you what the furniture will look like in your space. Manufacturers will deliver and install your furniture scheme for you using a trained team that know their products intimately. The downside of dealing directly with a manufacturer though is that they can only sell you what they make. Whilst they may produce the industry leading height adjustable desk, their seating may not be as good as their competitors, nor their storage units, nor their reception desks... you get the picture. It is also true that many manufacturers have large clients vital to their business and when they come calling everything else takes a back seat and your order, vital to your company, might find itself side-lined in terms of attention or production slot to make way for what they deem a more important job. Unfortunately being a small fish in a big pond is never a great place to be.

The second option is a furniture dealer. Dealers have often long standing relationships with numerous manufacturers across the UK and Europe. This means they can recommend the best desk to suit your budget from one manufacturer, the best task chair from a second, the best storage unit from a third... It's not uncommon for a project to have products from 15+ manufacturers in a single scheme to make best use of their ability to cherry pick the best products to suit your needs. A good dealer knows exactly where to find the best products for your project at the best price from a massive choice of different manufacturers and products, and of course you still benefit from the made to order breadth of choice of finishes as you would if you were speaking to the manufacturer direct.

Dealers can plan space and produce CGIs on request although these will often be chargeable as not too many have the demand to employ an in house visualiser full time and so have to use freelance experts to do this for them. Dealers place multiple orders with manufacturers every year and as such have much more clout with them to keep your project on track if the manufacturer tries to delay production for any reason. Dealers make their profit by using this buying power of multiple purchases a year to secure better buy prices than end users will be offered direct. Indeed the majority of manufacturers use their dealer partners as their route to market and actually won't take direct orders from end users. This means the end user will often get the benefit of their expertise and them taking all the time commitment of finding products and liaising with manufacturers away but still pay less than they would if they chose to go direct. This is of course dependant on the profit margin the dealer adds to their buy prices. It is always worth asking a dealer what these margins are - a good dealer won't mind being transparent about this.

Dealers will also use their own trained installation teams and project managers to install the furniture scheme to an agreed programme, remove all packaging for recycling and leave their client ready to move in. The cons of using a dealer can be the quality of the staff member assigned to your project. In order to add real value they need to have a wide knowledge of the industry and the products available and be able to pull a complicated logistical puzzle of using multiple manufacturers for your project into a coherent plan which is delivered as promised. Speak to the dealer to understand who will be running your project, and their experience to ensure you haven't been allocated someone who was working in an unrelated industry the week before.

Once happy you have the right project manager ensure they will be running the project from start to finish – swapping a PM in the middle of a project is a recipe for disaster. A good dealer will provide real value, take away huge amounts of stress from you and leave you with a space looking far better than you would have imagined for your budget.

The final option is to procure your furniture through your fit-out contractor if your project is an entire build. The advantage of this is that it keeps all the responsibility of co-ordination in one place and leaves you just one company to deal with. Larger contractors will have their own in house furniture dealer, smaller contractors will usually partner with an independent dealer to give them the furniture expertise they lack or partner with a manufacturer to supply furniture solutions for their projects that need it. The pros and cons of this are the same as those listed above if you were dealing direct with a manufacturer or dealer yourself, with one significant difference and that is there is now a further profit margin in the chain – that of the contractor. Contractors work to higher margins than furniture companies and the majority simply apply these margins to the furniture price they get from their furniture partner and include these prices in their overall project costs. It's not unusual for these mark-ups to be 30% so this needs to be weighed against the benefit of a single contact. If your project is anything larger than a handful of staff it will always show a significant saving to remove the furniture from the contractor's package and find a manufacturer or dealer to deal with this element separately. They will also liaise with the contractor so if you choose your partner carefully, they will ensure co-ordination is as efficient as if the contractor was managing this element themselves.

I hope this helps to clarify the options available to you for your project and allow you to decide what's best for your own circumstances.

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