

Products designed with users in mind

by Mary Greene



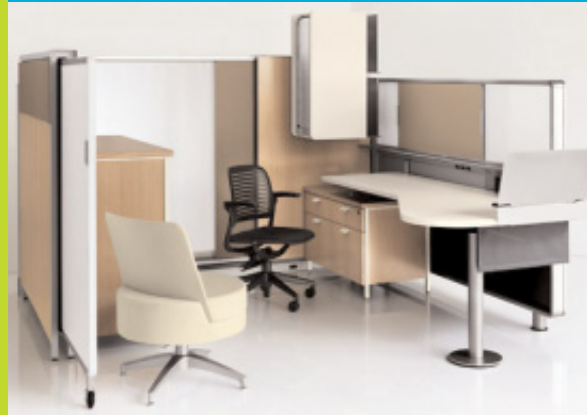
Product design has to start somewhere.

Maybe it's a quick sketch on a napkin. Maybe it's a full market assessment and research report.

But wherever it starts, the product design path at Metro always leads to people.



A recent conversation with Metro's award-winning product development team provides a few insights into the process that leads to their success. It turns out it's all about people—not the people designing the products, but the people who will be using them.



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Products designed with users in mind, continued

“We work to make all aspects of our products simpler and easier for the people who will interact with them... from planning, specifying and ordering, to receiving, installing and reconfiguring,” said Lew Epstein, vice president and creative director. “But ultimately, our focus is on the end user, and their experience of work.”

Jess Sorel, director of design, agreed.

“We’re very protective of the end user’s experience,” Sorel said. “That’s where you experience the brand on a daily basis; that’s the experience we value the most.”

Experience. It’s clearly a recurring theme in the Metro development process.

In its quest to create another successful design with the Topo line of office furniture (launched at NeoCon 2004), the product development team went on the road in the fall of 2002 to expand their own experiences and perspectives.

At 30 work sites throughout the United States, the Metro team catalogued observations and comments about how people were working, the tools they were using, and the artifacts that they bring to the office to adapt their work spaces to their work styles.

How people are working

When you consider the millions of dollars that contract furniture manufacturers have invested in developing state-of-the-art ergonomic task chairs, you might expect people to sit in them all day.

But they don’t. The Metro team observed people at work engaging in a variety of postures throughout the day: sitting, standing, pacing, propping, leaning, and lounging. Home furnishings typically support all these postures, while the traditional office clearly favors upright (some would say uptight) seating. Comfortable lounge seating, when it exists, seems to reside in public settings like the reception area, where people are least likely to recline.

For the Metro team, observing the multiplicity of human postures validated some key assumptions.

“For many years, Metro has been focused the humanity of work,” said Sorel. “We’ve tried to make it more comfortable and intuitive... reflective of the more dynamic comfort that exists beyond the workplace.”

He said the design team pushed that concept in Topo. “Our desire was to create spaces that are more relaxed and comfortable, spaces that will delight the people who use them.”

“We work to make all aspects of our products simpler and easier for the people who will interact with them”

- Lew Epstein, vice president and creative director, Metro



Products designed with users in mind, continued

The tools people are using

Twenty years ago, computers were just beginning to pop up on people's desks: big beige monstrosities with monitors a mile deep. Ten years ago, the popularity of laptop computers was on the rise, and hotshot professionals had mobile phones wired into their cars. Today, large flat screens dominate the desktop, while diminutive cell phones, pagers and PDAs—and their assorted charger's—litter horizontal surfaces at work and at home.

The Metro team observed that with the proliferation of handheld electronics, the virtual tether between worker and desktop computer is rapidly disappearing. The abundance of portable tools has set people free to work any time, anywhere.

"In Topo, we designed the windowsill, a five-inch-deep surface designed to hold PDAs and cell phones, and keep them charged all the time... without cluttering the desktop," said Otto Williams, senior designer. "The only true way to leverage all that technology is the ability to take it with you," said Otto Williams, senior designer.

And workers are taking it with them, along with their work... often to Starbucks, the freeway, or the home front. Because in traditional workplace settings, the freedom to move is not always encouraged.

"We wanted to create a space at work that allowed people to take full advantage of that freedom," said Sorel. "The ability to work in multiple places can be very desirable. We were interested in bringing that flexibility into the workspace, and in making it more seamless... in contrast to the static, imposed uniformity that we have seen in workspaces over the years."

Artifacts from home

It could be a college coed's dream or a facility manager's nightmare: spaces accented by shoji screens, floor lamps and funky furnishings from home. But Metro's design team witnessed all of the above, and more, in workspaces from coast to coast.

"People instinctively personalize their space," said Williams. "When the furniture that's provided does not allow them to adjust their level of privacy, they bring in a screen. When the space is too hot, they bring in a fan. When there's no comfortable place to sit, in comes the butterfly chair."

The Metro team sees significance in each artifact.

"Each item from home is addressing an unmet need of the end user," Williams said. "And these unmet needs correspond to product design opportunities."

"The ability to work in multiple places can be very desirable. We were interested in bringing that flexibility into the workspace"

- Jess Sorel, director of design, Metro



One of the Metro team's responses to their observations was the integration of sliding screens in Topo.

"The effect of being able to open or close your space is quite huge," said Sorel. "It creates a sense of security and ownership not common in open plan places."

Active, anticipated, archived

In addition to their own field research, the Metro design team routinely integrates learnings from Steelcase corporate research.

Particularly useful in the development of Topo was Steelcase end user research on document storage and handling. Steelcase studies have shown that paper files and resources of office workers fit in three broad categories: active work (the article I'm writing now); anticipated work (the positioning statement I'll write Monday); and archived work (the project I finished last week).

End users typically manipulate the worksurfaces and storage they have to accommodate all three kinds of work. Archived documents go into the lateral file, anticipated documents are piled somewhere within reach, and active documents are front and center.

For Topo, the Metro design team translated the research into furniture that accommodates three modes of

work (sitting, standing, lounging) while providing four places to manage information.

"We are very sensitized to how people want to work," said Sorel. "This is a much more holistic approach to ergonomics. You need to move, and this product gives you room to do that."

Ultimately, it comes back to the experience.

"Metro is a brand that creates an experience," Sorel said. "Comfort, aesthetics, function... we believe that good design holds all of those attributes in balance. A successful design focuses on all three, adding up to the experience as a whole."

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Topo

to-pog-ra-phy

Pronunciation Key (tə-ˈpā-grə-fē)

n.

1. Detailed, precise description of a place or region.
2. Graphic representation of the surface features of a place or region on a map, indicating their relative positions and elevations.

In Metro's latest collection of office furnishings, high performance meets modern residence.

With decidedly urban appeal and residential sensibility, Topo brings an arresting range of shapes and heights to the workplace... all designed to replace the dreaded sea of sameness in office cubes. Transparent panels filter light instead of blocking it. Screens slide open to invite conversation, then close to tune it out. Upper storage has been turned on its ear, opening pathways of light and motion.

"When you walk into a workplace, it shouldn't be all even and homogenous," said Otto Williams, senior designer. "That's one of the things we sort of rebelled against... Topo compositions can be dynamic and appealing."

The dynamic heights and volumes of Topo allow freedom of movement and light in the most spacious—and perhaps the most humane—8x8 ever imagined.

Dynamic. Spacious. Humane. Also welcoming, comfortable, residential, classic, high-performance, modern, smart, warm, flexible.

These are the words the Metro design team uses to describe Topo, named for the shifting altitudes it makes possible. Lewis Epstein, vice president and creative director; Jess Sorel, director of design; Otto Williams, senior designer; Joe Nobles, designer; and Todd Sorel, mechanical designer, spent 21 months bringing Topo to life.

Early in the process, their field research told them that old notions of hierarchy are changing, new symbols of prestige are emerging, and the workplace is where it all gets sorted out.

"It's a new generation of workers and decision makers," said Nobles. "The corner office with casegoods is not the status symbol it once was. Technology is pretty democratic now; people just want to be empowered to do their job and do it well."

Many workplaces today are populated with workers representing different ages, backgrounds and perspectives.

"When you have three generations as co-workers, you have to factor in the needs of different folks," said Epstein. "Businesses need more flexible environments... not just physical flexibility, but also financial flexibility. We're in a very evolutionary phase; the cause for a singular answer is in the past."

Still, research revealed that as much as workers yearn to express their individuality, facility managers crave simplicity, and designers want it to look good. Topo meet the needs of all three groups. User orientation, control and ergonomics are built in. The statement of line is very focused and concise, with each piece designed

for a multitude of uses. A modern set of surface materials, from plastic to metal to wood, affords a range of expression grounded in authenticity. The result is unmistakably intentional, emphatically different, completely fresh and new.

But maybe not for everybody.

"It's not universal; it's a very specific system," said Epstein. "We didn't want to be another all-things-to-all-people solution. To make it do too many things would have compromised its clarity."

Clarity. What's most clear about Topo is the experience it imparts. Designed to support the human figure sitting, standing, and even reclining, a Topo workspace is an inviting oasis for active work and quiet reflection.

"When we started down this path, we had one guiding thought," Epstein said. "If we can just improve the quality of life at work, we will have done a great job."

Founded in 1905, Metro has been manufacturing contract office furniture for decades. From its perch on the San Francisco Bay in Oakland, California, the company has steadily evolved from a quiet niche manufacturer to an important voice in the world of workplace thinking and design. Since becoming a member of the Steelcase Design Partnership in 1987, Metro's achievements have earned more than 75 prestigious honors and awards for design and ingenuity.