

Instant Office

By Ken Shulman

A new Internet company hopes to introduce mass customization to a segment of the market long resistant to change.

DNA is a populist idea: an effort to bring high-quality made-to-order office furniture to people who could never before obtain or afford it, and then give them a voice in how that furniture is assembled and customized. A joint venture between designer Richard Holbrook and contract-furniture manufacturer Teknion, DNA fuses fine modular design with a novel 3-D Internet tool that allows potential buyers to inspect, configure, and order their office systems online. The program made its online and showroom debut in March.

"Our mission is to allow dealers to say yes to the home-office worker and the small business office," says Holbrook, an award-winning designer best known for the Ambi Workchair and the Levity Collection, both of which he created for Herman Miller Inc. "These are the people who can truly benefit from these products—and who until now the industry really hasn't been able to help."

DNA operates out of the same Pasadena offices as Holbrook's Round Three design company. Potential clients visit the Web site (www.tekniondna.com), where an easy-to-use 3-D design tool lets them experiment with various combinations of workstation components and arrive at the most viable and attractive solution. Created for the home-office worker—and for the burgeoning ranks of telecommuters and small start-up offices—DNA affords small- and medium-size offices the same levels of service, customization, and design that the contract-furniture industry previously reserved for Fortune 500 clients.

"Buying office furniture is a long, unwieldy process," Holbrook says. "It just doesn't mesh with the reality of small business. Part of the inspiration for this came out of my own frustration. As my business grew and evolved, I saw that even I—with all my connections in the business—couldn't get the right furniture, or get it right away."

There was another frustration that motivated Holbrook in his desire for something new. The Levity Collection, which was lauded by both industry and end users, never attained the volume of sales that Holbrook had hoped for. The designer was unhappy with Herman Miller's approach to the



manufacture, pricing, and promotion of the collection. "We lost a lot of blood on that program," he says. "I'm still convinced that it's a great product.

But it didn't get into the hands of people who should have benefited from it. And now it will simply disappear, which is a crisis for a designer. Most of my thought after the failure with Levity was aimed at finding a way to avoid the same experience in the future."

Holbrook's conclusion was simple. He wanted to design good furniture for the SOHO—small-office, home-office—market, a sector too long ignored by the industry. To provide speedy customized service—and also to contain costs—he wanted to shift the customization and ordering processes to the Web. It was an ambitious and somewhat daunting plan. Long recognized as one of

the industry's most prolific and successful designers—Holbrook has won NeoCon golds for the Ambi Workchair (1995) and the Levity Collection (1998)—the 42-year-old designer had little experience in management or branding. But he did receive some good advice from his attorney and business advisor, Michael Shannon, now chief operating officer of DNA. "I suggested that instead of trying to build a new brand he extend the capacity of an already established one," Shannon says. "You find a valuable company with a good public image, and you take that company and brand where they are not taking themselves."

Holbrook and Shannon's search for a strategic partner took them to NeoCon in June 2000, where they discovered Teknion. Headquartered in Toronto, Canada, Teknion is a mid- to high-end contract office furniture company with 3,800 employees and 400 dealerships worldwide. The pair immediately liked what they saw. "Teknion had done such a masterful job of crafting its own brand image," Holbrook recalls. "They raised themselves off the street and up to the top tier of the

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