

POWER PACKS

CLOSE-UP

Adaptability is the order of the day for today's office furniture systems, which can be modified for use at the humblest to the highest executive level. But can British producers hold their own against stiff competition from Europe? Adrian Stokes assesses the problems facing the UK industry, while Peter Williams looks at three state-of-the-art products

We are currently living through the systems era of furniture and office environments. The bulk of the contract market is occupied by a huge selection of same-y systems products, with accompanying jargon employed to convince us of the correctness of this approach. For the most part, the marketing and design effort has achieved its aim, and many workers are penned into efficient, relocatable, cable-managed, systemised offices.

The 20 years or so of the office system have taken us through a variety of carefully constructed arguments about the most appropriate way people should work; spaces should be planned and psychology employed to increase efficiency and output. So why, given this immense effort to change our attitudes, is there such a flourishing market for executive furniture? Probably because efficiency is okay for most – but, at a higher level, exercising choice and displaying status is also pretty important. So we have an active market to satisfy this need to give the right signals.

In the systems field, the Brits are not terribly good, tending to latch on to developments rather than set any trends. So how are we doing with the quality stuff? And come next year, will imports do to our executive furniture what is currently being done to our crummy systems?

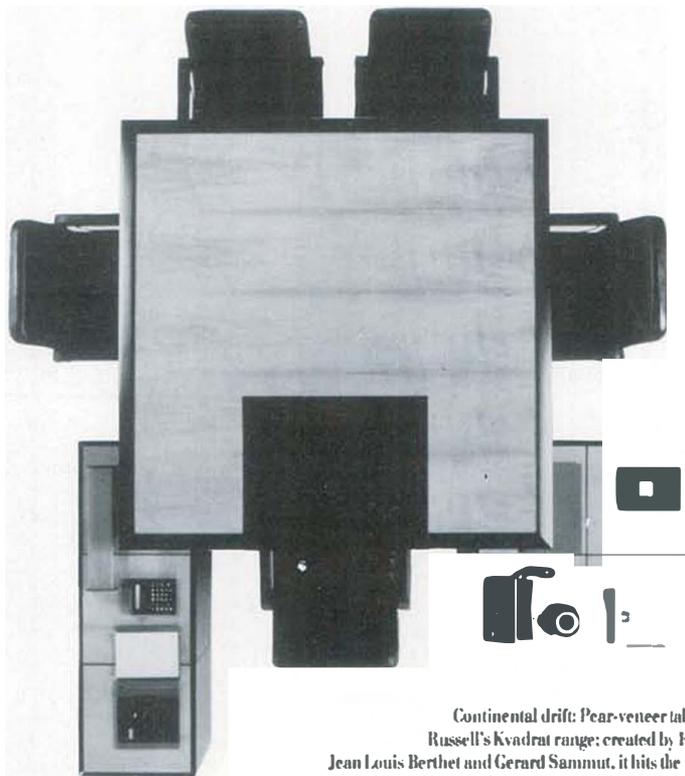
Probably not. The big boys are generally not "terribly good" at making the more crafted pieces which our managers require. Also, we have a sales system which is fairly protective.

In this country, executive furniture is sold through a network of small companies or dealers and, to a certain extent, through architects or specifiers. The dealer base is not about shifting attitudes; it requires simple, quality products which need the least effort to sell them and so, ironically, the furniture which is supplied for our high fliers is low tech and, very often, low design.

For the most part, executive furniture which fits the bill is the contract equivalent of the Ercol room-set. However, the specifier is often keen to provide a solution with some originality. He or she will probably seek this via the importers of Continental ranges.

So what are the problems attending executive furniture, and are they so different from those of systems for the rest of the company?

At a personal level probably not. A work surface, storage, lighting, and services handling (for technical equipment) are as necessary for the busy executive as for his busy team. Further requirements are a greater degree of privacy for meetings and a demonstration of position through the image conveyed. These last points relate not only to the individual manager but to the organisation as a whole, which thus broadens our executive office into the boardroom – often the singular statement about the nature of an organisation, its wealth, prestige and philosophy.



Continental drift: Pear-veneer table from Gordon Russell's Kvadrat range; created by French designers Jean Louis Berthet and Gerard Sammut, it hits the UK this summer

Contemporary executive furniture attempts to provide groups which develop the theme of executive furniture from the individual to the organisation. On the Continent, particularly, the storage-wall system is commonly offered; and the design is a great deal more sophisticated and the manufactured quality more consistently good.

How are the British measuring up to the Continentals, and can we hope to find Continental specifiers promoting UK executive furniture into their executive offices?

In Britain, manufacturers divide into two types. One group supplies traditional, solid variants on the double-pedestal throne in rosewood, mahogany, walnut and, if they are really trendy, bird's-eye maple; the format hasn't changed in years. The other supplies contemporary wares.

Mines and West and HNB have some neat and contemporary ranges, and both have a reputation for trying that bit harder to take a more innovative approach. Gordon Russell, now part of the Steelcase empire, has its feet in both camps with a swathe of traditional, beautifully crafted, classic (but dull) ranges, while offering the most serious attempt during the past few years to match the approach of top-flight Continentals. More recently the company has retained designers Weil and Taylor to address the problem in the middle executive market,

and is moving some of this product into Europe via its network there.

To compete in Europe is not easy. Some of the most respected names – Marcatre, Castelli, B & B Italia, Knoll, Rosenthal and Unifor – are well established, and UK manufacturers do not have much presence. Nor do they have the resources, reputation or ranges to make a mark.

While it may seem glib to say these things, reputations have to be built – and this takes time and resources. No UK manufacturer made the effort during the good times of the mid-Eighties, and it is unlikely to happen now. A trip around industry showcase Interior Design International would convince even the most optimistic Anglophile to look elsewhere for our export potential.

Today's executive market in the UK demands a very particular solution and, as in many areas of domestic furniture, the industry supplies what the retailer or dealer believes sells. But, as they say, a Yugo seems a pretty good car if it's all you're offered. Soon the furniture equivalent of the BMW will come ashore, offering quality, function, design and affordability. I'm afraid I'm not very optimistic.

Adrian Stokes
Adrian Stokes is principal of ASA Designers: ASA is retained by Steelcase Stratfor as design consultant.