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The Seat of Power

High-tech chair a symbol of comfort and clout in the workplace

By Beth Healy, Globe Staff, 2/2/2001

Seated between two of his company's biggest investors at a board meeting in an old South Boston warehouse, Steven Levy was prepared to be grilled. He had all the numbers on the MacGregor Group's financial software business - the revenue, the profit forecast. Then a director leaned forward and cast his glance over the 18 chic, green, high-tech chairs around the table. "That's where your capital went," he said gravely. "Those chairs go for \$2,000 apiece." Levy said he paid only \$575 each for the stripped-down version of the chair, and he has the invoice to prove it.

But the stylish Herman Miller "Aeron" looks and feels expensive. Hip, high-tech, and translucent, it is more than a comfortable perch for workaholics. It has become a symbol of the new economy's indulgences and triumphs. Cool chairs are now perks that lure talent, and they've raised the expectations of cubicle dwellers forever. "Once you sit in it you don't want to sit in anything else," said Laura Alves, an executive assistant at Battery Ventures, a Wellesley firm that invests in start-ups. Aeron's actually move with you, she explained. "They predict your movement. They fit like a glove." This is not the sort of rhapsody that normally comes with spending long hours in front of a computer. But this award-winning chair is not your standard fabric-over-foam on wheels. The Aeron breathes, thanks to its taut, mesh fabric. Its frame is made of recycled soda bottles. Its suspension hugs the back and a so-called "Kinemat tilt" gives one the sensation of floating.

"We wanted something very lightweight, yet elastic, that would conform to various body sizes and shapes," said Don Chadwick, who, along with Bill Stumpf, has been designing chairs for Zeeland, Mich.-based Herman Miller since 1974. "The motion of the chair is different from any other." Indeed, there is no backward lurch when one leans back, no awkward jolt while crossing one's leg. The Aeron, which retails for \$699 and can cost much more depending on the model, moves subtly. As senior product manager Randy Brown said, "It actually encourages movement. It allows for blood flow, muscle ligament movement." Comfort is just part of the package. The Aeron is also about glamor, power, and art. It has appeared on the television sit-com "Will and Grace," in a scene about "chair envy." And it has a place in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection.

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Clearly, sitting - on one's posterior and not one's laurels - has gained new respect in the Internet age. At the end of the 1990s, members of the 24/7 crowd were spending more time than ever at their desks and in meetings. Bosses worried about morale and rented digs with big windows and exposed brick. They bought Foosball tables and stocked the office refrigerator with sparkling water. And they bought chairs so comfortable they'd make the average banker or middle manager weep. Levy, the MacGregor Group chief executive, boasts that he pays just \$8 a square foot for the firm's funky office space. But as a former computer programmer, he refused to skimp on the chairs. He bought 150 Aérons and plans to buy 250 more this year, as the firm hires and expands. "We wanted very comfortable chairs because people have to sit in them for a long time," Levy said. "I have to look our employees in the eye every day. I want to have a nice space for them, no matter what."

This emphasis on office style and comfort has been a boon for Herman Miller. The 77-year-old chairmaker just enjoyed its best quarter ever, with record earnings of \$42.3 million on sales of \$592.5 million for the period ended Dec. 2. Though launched in 1994, the Aeron is still a growing contributor to the bottom line. "People kind of felt like they had to have it," Chadwick, the designer, said. The chair caught on with Hollywood types first, he said. Then, "it became a symbol of being sort of hip and involved with the high-tech world." There is still a sense of needing to earn a classy chair, however, at least here in Yankee New England. Start-ups that rushed off to buy Aérons or other fancy seating before they had revenues or profits to show have annoyed their investors. Tom Crotty, a general partner at Battery Ventures, was horrified to spot \$1,200 Aérons in the offices of a Cambridge start-up just months after Battery had invested in it. "I was like, what are you guys spending our money on?" Crotty said. "They didn't have enough adult supervision." The company, @stake Inc., a Web security firm, quickly hired a new chief executive and is being more careful with its money, Crotty said. Some companies have been less lucky. Scores of failed dot-coms have had their Aérons snatched up by liquidators; others have put their luxurious chairs up for sale on eBay's auction site, where a used bottom-of-the-line Aeron is fetching about \$500. But the dot-com generation has left, among its ashes, a legacy of democratic comfort to the rest of the working masses. It changed the definition of the power chair, banishing to relic status the high-backed leather chair of the 1950s corner office. Asked whether this is the be-all, end-all of chairs, Chadwick, the designer, said, "I hope not." He added, "A good chair happens every 10 years. Maybe." Beth Healy can be reached by e-mail at bhealy@globe.com.

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