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Mesh vs Fabric – The History of Office Chair Upholstery.



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From the horsehair-stuffed Rococo chairs of the French nobility to frilly fashion statements of medieval England, in this article, we're going to explore the origins of modern office chair upholstery.



Every day, millions of office workers around the world sit down without giving a second thought to the rich history that went into their favourite office chair's material. But why should they? The evolution of chair upholstery hardly seems like a page-turner.

Not only is it a fascinating story, but it helps explain the aesthetic and design we see in office chair trends today.

Fabric Covered Chairs

At some point in history, people became sick of sitting on a hard, wooden chair. At first, small pillows were used as cushions. But with them being removable, it meant that they were constantly being misplaced or stolen.

It wasn't until the late 16th century that chair frames were upholstered for the very first time. Created in England to accommodate a specific fashion choice, the Farthingale chair was named after the very large, wide-hooped skirts that were all the rage in the late 1500s. For the first time in history, women of nobility had somewhere to sit without ruining their favourite dress.

Meanwhile, across the English Strait, the French were inventing their own version of the padded fabric chair. Rococo chairs from the 1720s featured fabric-covered sections that could be swapped out to match the season or room décor.

Even though the French nobility used them almost exclusively, the cushioning used in these early chairs was far from elegant. They filled these chairs with materials like grass, feathers, sawdust, and animal hair instead of using foam, latex, or rubber. The only problem with this was that, over time, the cushion and seat backing would become lumpy and uncomfortable. Horsehair stuffing soon gave way to a system of steel-spring cones held in place with a lashing cord.



Farthingale chair

Over the next few centuries, the humble fabric-covered padded chair evolved and split into many different designs made from a variety of materials. This includes leather, linen, polyurethane, cotton, wool, and other synthetics.

Mesh Covered Chairs

Despite their simplicity and how commonly they're found in today's office, the modern mesh chair was actually created for a completely different purpose. Back in the late 1970s, inventor [Bill Stumpf was busy designing revolutionary new products for Herman Miller](#).

He'd already created the "Ergon", the world's first commercially available ergonomic chair with wheels and a swivel motion.

Unlikely Inspiration

It was upon a visit to the geriatric ward of a local hospital that the inspiration for the next wave of chair upholsteries was born. In the wards, waiting areas and specialist dialysis treatment rooms, Bill and his colleague Don Chadwick noticed that the only chairs for patients were large [La-Z-Boy](#) recliners.



Lashing spring system



Ergon Chair

While these chairs were comfortable enough, they weren't very practical for the elderly patients that mostly used them. For starters, it required users to "fall" back into it because the footrest didn't allow users to get their feet directly under them while sitting. Secondly, the lever to elevate the footrest was also difficult to manipulate. Finally, the foam stuffing spread the user's weight unevenly, while not allowing the material to breathe. This caused the uneven retention of heat and moisture.

Users of these chairs would frequently complain of pain, cramping and bedsores. This was compounded by the fact that many needed assistance to get out of the chair.

The Sarah Chair: The First Prototype

Keeping all of this in mind, Stumpf and Chadwick embarked on creating a lightweight and breathable chair that people with reduced mobility could easily use. This would be the birth of the Sarah chair, a high-end chair marketed to the elderly and those in need of lengthy medical procedures like chemotherapy and liver dialysis.



La-Z-Boy Recliner

Unlike the La-Z-Boy, the Sarah chair featured a footrest that folded in under the seat when closed, leaving the user with room to curl their legs under the chair as they sat down. When a sitter fully reclined, the chair's fins flipped up to support their feet, resembling the fins on a wheelchair. They replaced the lever with a pneumatic control inspired by the recline buttons on aeroplane seats.

However, the chair's greatest innovation remained concealed; instead of the typical upholstered wooden box support, a plastic mesh stretched across a plastic frame supported its foam cushions. This allowed the foam to be thinner and more adaptable to the body shape. The design also helped to mitigate heat build-up since the foam's backing is exposed to air.

But there was a problem.

While everyone loved the design, it simply didn't sell well. No one knew how to market high-end chairs to sick and elderly people. Added to the fact that the Sarah chair offered narrow margins when it did sell – it was no wonder that Herman Miller was quick to scrap the idea.



The Sarah Chair

Aeron: The Birth of a Mesh Revolution

Even so, Stumpf and Chadwick believed in some of the new design elements they had created and endeavored to incorporate them into their next project, The Aeron chair. Closer to today's mesh-wrapped office chair, the Aeron ditched the foam cushions that sat over the top of Sarah's mesh covering. They argued that the mesh would conform to a user's body while at the same time being incredibly breathable. It turns out, they were right, and the Aeron chair sparked an office revolution.

Today, mesh chairs are in all locations, from offices to libraries and everywhere in between.



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