



## Knoll's New "Generation" Chair: Stylish Engineering and Comfort

Posted by: Reena Jana on May 29

The Generation by Knoll chair, which will debut at the NeoCon World's Trade Fair in Chicago in mid-June, is as comfortable an office seat as it is eye-catching. I've been trying it out for a couple of weeks. During those weeks, though, I went away on business. When I was away, some of my colleagues came by my office and tried it out. This was evidenced by the different height of the chair when I returned. And they confessed.

As you can see from the picture, the chair probably doesn't look a lot like many of the furnishings you might have in your workspace today. The back looks more like a plastic web or netting, reminiscent of the mesh found in hip sneakers than the rigid, screen-like back of the iconic Aeron chair (which I normally sit in). And the webby back conforms and moves with your body. Unlike many previous office chairs designed before the mid-2000s, which were made for one type of work only—sitting straight and forward, looking at a computer screen and typing or talking on the phone—this chair allows you to lean toward a collaborator to listen more easily to what she has to say, or to sit sideways to engage with, say, someone you're mentoring.

The PR team at Knoll met with me on a couple of occasions, detailing at length the engineering that went into the Generation chair. One member of their marketing group even did an impressive presentation in which she moved her upper body in dramatic circles while sitting in a prototype of the chair, as if a modern dancer. While most of us won't really be shifting around in quite so theatrical arcs at work, the demonstration certainly showed off just how flexible the chair really is.

Why make a chair with such a fluid back? Well, Knoll, like all of the major office-furniture makers, conducts sophisticated research on workplace needs to develop their products. Knoll supplied me with a draft of a research paper on new modes of work, based on interviews with executives and some 52,000 surveys of office workers in a variety of industries. Basically, the research showed that while most people today work in four types of styles—alone (which they call "focus" work); with people they manage or advise ("share" work); with others ("team" work); or engaged in some sort of action dealing with workplace culture ("activity" work), their offices and furniture are still only geared toward traditional, at-your-desk, look-straight-forward work.

So Knoll decided to create a chair that could help people work in all four modes by accommodating each in a single, easily adjustable seat. The Knoll team, with outside partners Formway Design, began working on it in 2005, and have registered a "number" of patents (according to Knoll's Senior VP of Marketing Communications, David Bright) on the Generations by Knoll chair engineering, namely on the flexible back and the controls of the chair's seat-suspension mechanisms. (Also, it's worthwhile to mention that the chair is made of eco-friendly materials, so it has earned a Sustainable Platinum rating under the SMaRT<sup>®</sup> Sustainable Product Standard. Knoll has announced that this is an "industry first.")

Did the chair help me work in all four modes? Well, it certainly made my "focus" work better. So much so that I found myself working for hours on end, not getting up that often, and staring straight ahead at my computer. Because my co-workers wanted to come see the chic and mysterious chair that people had been whispering about in the hallway, I didn't have to get up quite so often for company. At least when they came over to visit, I could move very easily from side to side to shift between talking to two or three people, without major body adjustments. However, I have to wonder if today's ergonomically correct chairs are so pleasant to sit and "collaborate" in that they discourage movement outside of the chairs themselves. It's good news for your back, but I'm wondering about workers' legs. Perhaps that's a future design challenge.

The Generation by Knoll chair has a list price of \$1,195. With corporate discounts, most companies will pay about 30% less than that for each unit. So far, one hip, prominent company—Knoll can't disclose which—has pre-ordered the chairs for some of its offices. For a profitable and very stylish company, the chair could be worth it. Think of it as a reward to staff who have done well to buoy a company through some very tough economic times...and a possible investment in keeping them working longer, harder hours both as a team and as individuals. For companies watching their budgets and are laying off staff, well, it probably wouldn't be an expense to approve. But at the very least, perhaps Knoll's research that helped fuel the design of the Generation chair could come in handy as insight on how to re-invent one's offices during a time of transition.