Insight *Briefing*

Intuitive design:
The changing face of workplace interactions

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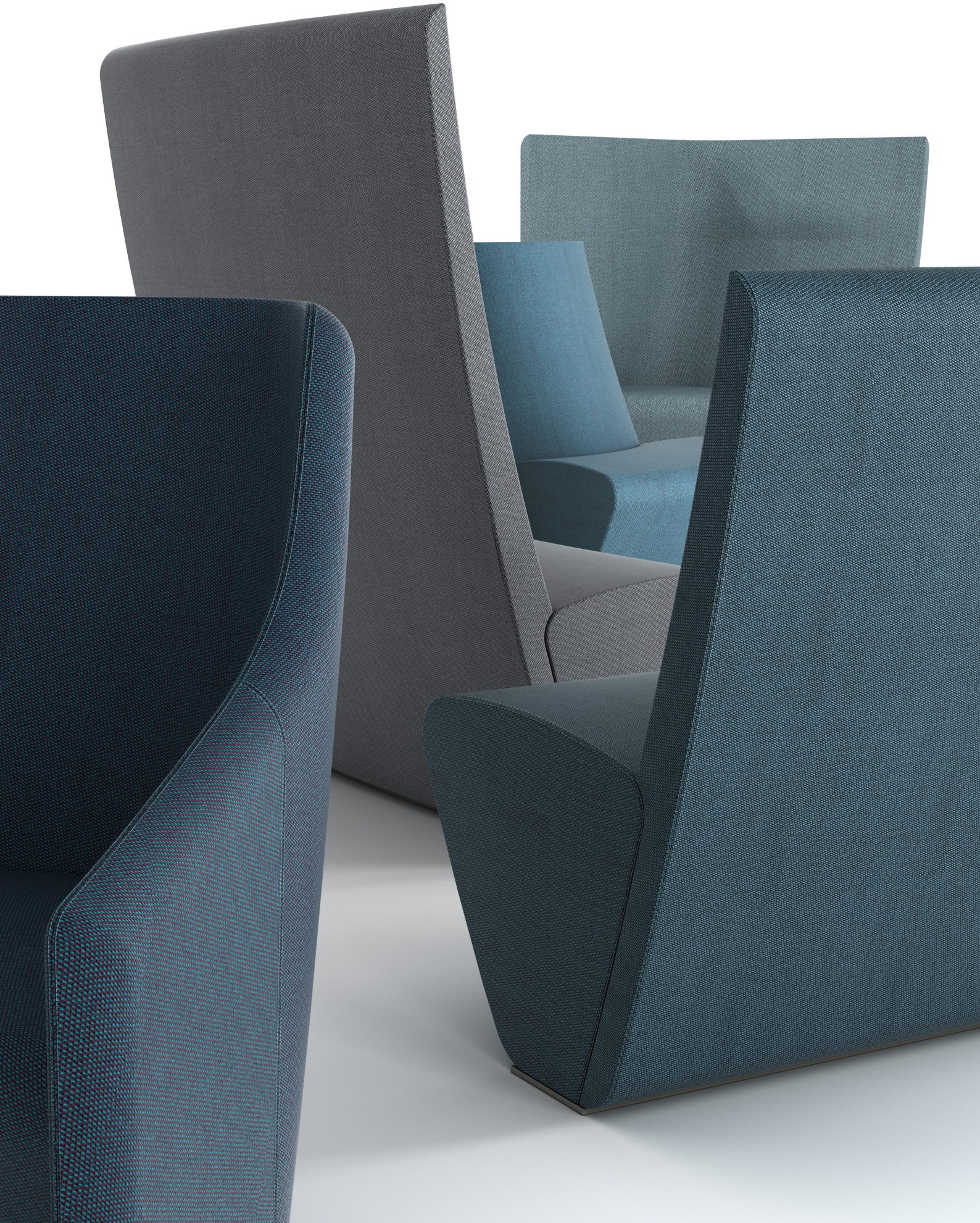

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Foreword

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In his famous 1988 book The Design of Everyday Things, the cognitive scientist Donald Norman suggests that the way we interact with objects and our surroundings is determined almost entirely by their design. People cannot be the primary reason things succeed or fail, because they are constant, while the design of the object itself is the variable. People can expect to learn how to use things better, but without an underlying people-centric and intuitive approach to design, the design will fail to some degree or other. He concludes that the designer should focus their attention on the interaction between people and the design of objects and surroundings.

This principle becomes more relevant with each passing day, as the number of interactions we have with designed objects increases.

This is most obvious with regard to our interactions with technology, but it is also apparent across our entire lives.

People can expect to learn how to use things better, but without an underlying people-centric and intuitive approach to design, the design will fail to some degree

There can be no better or more contemporary example than Uber. The technology behind the app is not seen as new or ground-breaking. What has allowed Uber to go from start-up to global prominence in the space of just nine years is the fact that it makes things easy for the user. Its strength is not its technology, but its design. The ability to order a car with a few taps of a smartphone screen transformed an entire sector worldwide.

This may be more apparent in the modern world, but the underlying principle has been understood for a long time. As long as half a century ago the designer Dieter Rams set out his famous Ten Principles of Good Design, which include the demands that good design makes a product useful, innovative, honest and understandable.

His influence is felt to this day, not least in the work of Sir Jonathan Ive with Apple. There is a minor Internet meme based on comparisons between Rams' work for Braun and Ive's own products for Apple, which are now regarded as exemplars of intuitive design thinking. Maybe

the best known example is the T3 Pocket Radio from 1958, which has a minimal design and circular tuner that became synonymous with the innovative, intuitive design of the iPod in the early years of this Century. Both products reflect the gestures and instincts common to all of us, which is why their design resonates across the years.

What has changed in the interim is an increased expectation that we should find our interactions with design to be immediate and coherent. This expectation has now extended to our surroundings as well as discreet objects and technology. We have neither the time nor inclination to learn how to use something, when a better design would make it immediately obvious.

If we want people to move to the space best suited to their needs, then the workplace must make the purpose and functioning of its elements obvious to them

In terms of workplace design, the greater use of shared and public space means this not only includes the design of specific items of furniture but also the overall design of the workplace. If we want people to move to the space best suited to their needs, then the workplace must make the purpose and functioning of its elements obvious to them. In other words, it must behave more like one of their favourite devices, and its individual spaces more like an app.

Oliver Ronald

Changing expectations

A changing approach to workplace design

At the 1983 Design Conference in Aspen, Steve Jobs crystallised his thoughts on intuitive, simple design in a speech entitled The Future Isn't What It Used to Be. "The main thing in our design is that we have to make things intuitively obvious," Jobs told the audience, describing the new user interface on the generation of Apple Macintosh computers which was based on a desktop. "People know how to deal with a desktop intuitively. If you walk into an office, there are papers on the desk. The one on the top is the most important. People know how to switch priority. Part of the reason we model our computers on metaphors like the desktop is that we can leverage this experience people already have."

What Jobs understood was that the technology was important, but so too was the aesthetic and the interface, which had to be recognisable to people from their past interactions with the physical world.

The technical term for this, and one that has become synonymous with Apple and similar products is skeuomorphic design (see inset). The same thinking was applied to later Apple products so that the user's interface with them mimicked gestures like how we turn the pages of a book. Of course, this metaphor is now also inverted as we expect physical objects to behave more like digital interfaces, as anybody who has ever seen that footage of a toddler trying to get a magazine to behave like an iPad understands. We are at a point in which any distinctions between the way we engage with physical and digital space are less and less apparent.

The changing expectations of users

Perhaps the most striking development in the world of work in recent years is the expectation of choice. An idea that has been developing for a quarter of a century is crystallising around the principle that people should be free to choose where, when and how to work and with whom.

In part, this has now been enshrined in law with the right for staff to request flexible working, but in reality many or possibly most organisations have already exceeded their legal expectations. Since 2014, all employees in the UK have a legal right to request flexible working and research from

Skeuomorphic design

Skeuomorphic is a term most often used in interface design to describe the design of interfaces that draw on a cultural association or the experiences of users.

Some of the most well-known examples include the recycle bin icon on desktops, the floppy disk icon to save Word documents and the envelope symbol for email. The principle draws on these experiences to indicate functionality.

Steve Jobs believed computers should be so simple to use that a complete novice could master them based on instinct alone. He championed a style of design in which digital elements resembled real world objects that anyone could recognise.

Skeuomorphism's use in making interfaces more familiar and so easier to use stems from the early days of computing, especially with early versions of Apple's operating system. Apple has gradually discarded its original reliance on such ideas as users have grown increasingly accustomed to the new interfaces.

CIPD shows that 76 percent of employers in the UK now offer at least one form of flexible working. And 54 percent of employees now report that they work flexibly in some way.

One of the commonly held false narratives about this development is that these people work from home instead of a traditional office. The reality is that rather than a switch from one fixed place of work to another, the majority of people now have some degree of choice and many still opt to work from an office for a large part of the week and a number of reasons, far from the least of which are a sense of belonging the ability to interact with colleagues.

This is driving a fundamental change in the way people use the workplace. When they see it as one of a number of options of where to work, it must compete with many of the characteristics of its alternatives.

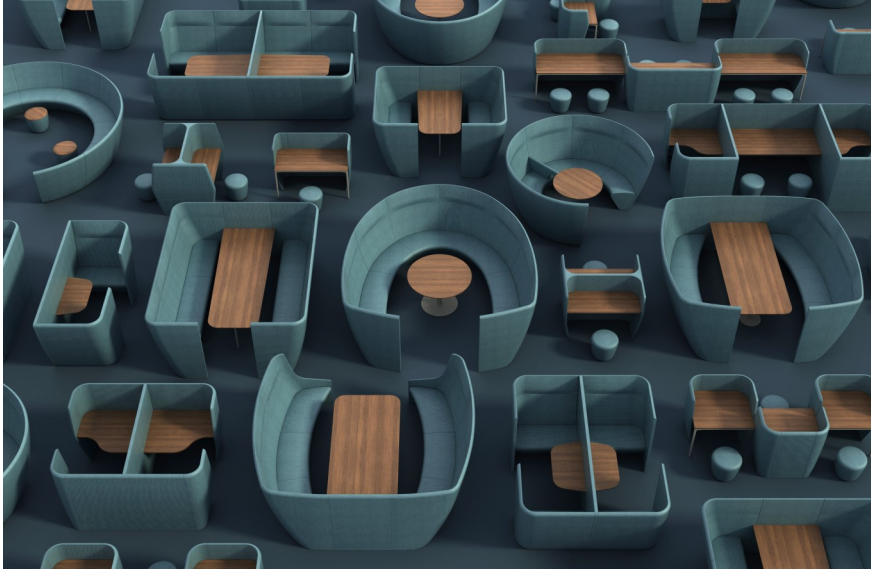
The intuitive design of the workplace must reflect the same skeuomorphic principles that define the design of so much technology by tapping into the cultural and learned experiences and expectations of the individual.

Changing expectations of organisations

Firms are also changing their own expectations of the workplace. According to CoreNet Global's 2016 report, The Bigger Picture: The Future of Corporate Real Estate, a transformation is underway in the corporate real estate sector as landlords, developers and occupiers all reassess what they expect from workplaces.

There is a fortunate overlap between these objectives and those of the people who work for occupiers. Organisations maintain their need to keep down costs and use the office as a signifier of culture and identity, but also need to offer people choices when it comes to work as part of their war for talent and need to engage staff.

The CoreNet report identifies how these confluent objectives reflect the emergence of intuitive mobile technology that draws on human behaviour. It concludes that the proliferation of personal devices as chosen by individuals is leading to an increasingly mobile and connected workforce. This in turn is changing real estate requirements in terms of how much physical space is required, where facilities are located, and how space is configured, utilised



When we experience a design as intuitive, it is because we have encountered something like it before. It is something recognisable, comprehensible and friendly

and managed. The report confirms that we are seeing corporate real estate teams and facilities managers teams becoming 'curators' rather than providers of space.

This role fits with broader trends about what firms expect from the workplace and the growing number of intersections between physical and digital workspace that they must create and manage. When the main role of the workplace shifts from providing people with a place to work in fixed ways to one in which they choose to work and collaborate with others, it opens up new possibilities.

The changing workplace

Where once, the default workplace design model for most organisations was likely to consist of dedicated workstations in an open plan layout supported by a number of meeting, breakout and learning spaces, it is now more likely to consist of a number of shared settings which people move to depending on what they are doing. This basic model forms the template from which most modern workplaces are now designed.

But this is not a new idea. This task based approach was originally developed as an idea more than two decades ago by progressive workplace thinkers such as Frank Duffy and Franklin Becker. It is now increasingly popular as flexible and agile working have become the norm rather than an exception for the majority of people. It is also aligned to the need for collaborative working models and take full advantage of immersive technology.

It does however present at least one challenge, which is how people should understand how to get the best out of the space. It is at this point that intuitive design principles play their part. When we experience a design as intuitive, it is because we have encountered something like it before. It is something recognisable, comprehensible and friendly. This is not only the essence of good intuitive design based on the skeuomorphic ideal, but good design generally, as set out as a broad set of principles by Dieter Rams which have influenced designers for decades.

When it comes to invoking the intuitions that will make workplaces easy to use and understand for users, we might say there are two aspects, the first technological, the second physical.

Technology

Technology can play a key role in ensuring that space is understood and engaged with immediately. It goes without saying that WiFi is as essential as washroom facilities and running water, but the increasingly widespread application of space booking systems now provides the interface between digital and physical space for mobile workers. Many of the apps allow people not only to book space for themselves but also share their whereabouts with others with whom they may want to meet. The physical workplace intersects with the app alongside various forms of communication technology, to

erode the distinctions between physical and digital space.

Such technology, alongside technological infrastructure such as the Internet of Things and sensors, is also very adept at gathering large quantities of data, informing strategic decision making and helping people work better. According to the Unum Future Workplace report, by 2030 HR departments will be increasingly focused on people analytics to create what the report calls an “Intuitive Workplace”, in which employees share information and access more information about their colleagues and the organisation.

If managed correctly, and with a usable interface, it’s a win-win situation. Employees benefit from technology that saves them time and allows them to work and collaborate in better ways, and employers benefit because they make better decisions with increases in productivity, engagement and wellbeing. The technology used by people in these settings must be as intuitive as that they use in the rest of their lives.

Employees benefit from technology that saves them time and allows them to work and collaborate in better ways, and employers benefit because they make better decisions

Physical space

The main characteristic of a traditional office was its fixedness. On the whole, people worked in fixed places and at fixed times. There was little or no need to worry about intuitive design in a space that relied on habit, dedicated spaces and routines to function.

There’s no better way to see how this has changed than with the advent of new models of workplace design and the issue of ergonomics and wellbeing.

The dedicated workstation with its desktop PC lends itself to the issue of ergonomics, with its emphasis on posture, still enshrined in the Display Screen Equipment regulations.

Ergonomics is still an important issue in the workplace but it is now merely a subset of the much

broader idea of wellbeing. If people are moving around an office based on their own choice of a variety of settings, the postures they adopt become significantly less of an issue, just as it is in schools and universities. In these environments, nobody is still enough for some of the associated musculoskeletal disorders to present themselves.

As it is with technology, a we'll designed physical space will also present the user with a readily understandable interface based on their experience and cultural associations.

So, if we want people to use the office as they would a domestic setting, a hotel, café or other public space, there is an easy way to indicate this to them. This is one reason why the design idioms we associate with such spaces is having such an effect on workplace design.

This intuitive approach is filtering down to product designs, many of which are coalescing around designed furniture systems that not only provide designers with a ready-made palette of products to create appropriate work settings, but also indicate to users how the products should be used.

The aim is for people to enjoy the setting but understand unconsciously how it is appropriate for whatever task they are doing at a particular time, as should be the case with the range of apps on their phone.

Dieter Rams' T3 Pocket Radio for Braun from 1958.

Rams' Ten Principles of Good Design

Good Design Is Innovative: The possibilities for innovation are not, by any means, exhausted. Technological development is always offering new opportunities for innovative design. But innovative design always develops in tandem with innovative technology, and can never be an end in itself.

Good Design Makes a Product Useful: A product is bought to be used. It has to satisfy certain criteria, not only functional but also psychological and aesthetic. Good design emphasizes the usefulness of a product while disregarding anything that could possibly detract from it.

Good Design Is Aesthetic: The aesthetic quality of a product is integral to its usefulness because products are used every day and have an effect on people and their well-being. Only well-executed objects can be beautiful.

Good Design Makes A Product Understandable: It clarifies the product's structure. Better still, it can make the product clearly express its function by making use of the user's intuition. At best, it is self-explanatory.

Good Design Is Unobtrusive: Products fulfilling a purpose are like tools. They are neither decorative objects nor works of art. Their design should therefore be both neutral and restrained, to leave room for the user's self-expression.

Good Design Is Honest: It does not make a product more innovative, powerful or valuable than it really is. It does not attempt to manipulate the consumer with promises that cannot be kept

Good Design Is Long-lasting: It avoids being fashionable and therefore never appears antiquated. Unlike fashionable design, it lasts many years – even in today's throwaway society.

Good Design Is Thorough Down To The Last Detail: Nothing must be arbitrary or left to chance. Care and accuracy in the design process show respect towards the consumer.

Good Design Is Environmentally Friendly: Design makes an important contribution to the preservation of the environment. It conserves resources and minimises physical and visual pollution throughout the lifecycle of the product.

Good Design Is As Little Design as Possible: Less, but better – because it concentrates on the essential aspects, and the products are not burdened with non-essentials. Back to purity, back to simplicity.

Conclusion

An intuitive workplace is one in which people are liberated to work in ways that suit them best without having to worry about being trained in the use of space and systems, technical support and cultural constraints on their time and activities.

It is becoming more prominent at a time when organisations are adopting models of workplace design that meets their own needs that share many of the same drivers for change.

What is intriguing about intuitive workplace design is that it can learn from the way we have designed both technology and spaces in other types of built environment. Where once, digital interfaces relied on real world associations to help people understand their functions, we are now witnessing an inversion of this principles in which it is tech that helps people make sense of the real world.

Similarly, the use of a range of settings for people to work, is drawing inspiration from other spaces to indicate their function. We have understood many of the principles that apply to this process for decades, but it is only now as the world of work changes fundamentally that we are able to appreciate and apply them fully. As long as humans remain at the heart of workplace design, we will be able to find better ways to design spaces for them.

In a world in which people have more and more choice about where and how to work, the challenge is to make the office better than all of the alternatives.

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About Boss Design

Founded in 1983, Boss Design is one of the UK's market leading manufacturer of high quality office seating, upholstery and tables, and enjoys global success within this design-led sector.

The company leads by example and continues to improve on the delivery of an intelligent and evolving portfolio, whilst maintaining the best ethical standards. Now employing more than 200 people across the globe, Boss Design has a wealth of experience in helping to enhance customers' corporate environments, offering choice, reliability and exceptional service.

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