

Rethinking Think

Even a breakthrough product can become better.

Behind every successful innovation is another innovation just waiting to happen, whether it's an improvement to what already exists or the invention of something entirely new. Either way, innovation is all about solving problems and offering new choices—second nature to designers.

“Designers never really stop designing,” says Bruce Smith, Steelcase director of global design. “We are guilty of constantly thinking how an experience can be better, because we know that even great ones can be improved. We’re always assessing the ‘rightness’ of what we see, always looking for opportunities to improve it. And that’s the value that design brings to life.”

This ingrained habit of design thinking led the Steelcase team to start asking, “Could Think be even better?” soon after this distinctive Steelcase seating product, designed in collaboration with Oliver Loew, was launched in 2004.

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Think was quickly lauded as an exciting, breakthrough innovation. It became Steelcase’s most globally successful product and, as the first Cradle-to-Cradle certified product on the planet, it created a higher sustainability standard across industries. But, as designers who don’t stop designing, the Steelcase Design Studio team continued to think about ways to improve upon its success, engaging the engineering and marketing teams early on in a collaborative approach that’s typical for the Steelcase product development process.

“Time passes, and our sense of what is relevant, meaningful and appropriate shifts,” Smith explains. “A lot has changed since 2004. Workers are more mobile, Think is now being used in a range of settings, and customer expectations for office furniture continue to rise. Meanwhile, we’ve learned about new materials, new molding technologies, new performance capabilities. We’ve gained eight more years of experience, and we’ve become more innovative as a company. All of this creates tremendous opportunities.”

Because design thinking begins and ends with understanding users, feedback from the hundreds of thousands of Think users throughout the world provided valuable insights. They delivered stories back to the design team about what they loved as well as what they thought could be tweaked, thereby defining and framing the improvement opportunities ahead.

Then, about two years ago the team began in earnest to generate ideas, analyze possibilities and move into rapid prototyping to test concepts of a new design for Think, working again in collaboration with Loew.

Steelcase recently unveiled the result of this extensive redesign effort: a new, improved Think. In many ways, it still has the familiar Think look, but the only parts exempt from the redesign were the casters. The 2004 Think has been completely repackaged as a higher-performing, sleeker and smarter chair.

Probably the most visibly noticeable change is the back. Instead of 20 independent flexors, the new Think has 15 uniquely shaped flexors that are linked together, part of its new Integrated Liveback® System designed to conform to users like never before. The entire back is just three parts—a frame, linked flexors and a dual-energy lumbar—that work together in a very intelligent system of ergonomic support.

“We’ve coordinated the relationships to bring support where needed and freedom when needed,” says Smith. “It’s a unique solution that expresses its capability with character.”

Another noteworthy performance improvement is an advanced weight-activated mechanism that means better support for reclining, and the seat cushion has been redesigned with adaptive bolstering for better comfort.

Many other improvements are smaller, but no less significant. For example, stainless steel accents add sophistication, and adjustments are more integrated and easier than ever to use. The back and seat edges are more comfortable, the backrest is slightly taller and more tapered, and the arm design is more robust.

The new Think has even fewer parts for faster disassembly and easier recycling. Even more important for sustainability, its improved durability, versatility and timeless appeal point to a longer life in a variety of office settings, from individual workstations to group settings such as conferencing areas and training rooms.

“I think of the 2004 Think as a teenager, full of great capability and promise in its own right,” Smith says. “Now the teenager is a grownup, more refined and elegant. We’ve taken all that innovation, all that intelligence, and made it something even better.”

Seeing its relaunch as a rite of passage, the Steelcase team seems almost ready to stop redesigning Think—at least for now.

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