

# Meet Bob King, the Innovator Working on Workplace Wellness Before Anyone Else

Humanscale has been a proponent of worker health, sustainability, and minimalism since the early 1980s

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For as long as there have been chairs, people have been trying to make them more comfortable. But it wasn't until the mid-1970s that industrial designers took up the study of ergonomics and applied it to task seating. By the beginning of the next decade, office work was one of the fastest-growing sectors of the job market; more Americans than ever were spending the day sitting at desks. As the workplace became more technological, entrepreneur Bob King developed a business idea. "I saw an opportunity for a product that made it easier for people to read computer monitors," he says.

In 1983, at age 27, he launched Humanscale to design and manufacture office furnishings "that allowed people's work to adjust to them, rather than the other way around," says King, now CEO

of the company, which has grown to more than 1,000 employees, three headquarters, and 50 showrooms worldwide.

In 1999, the Humanscale Freedom chair, designed in collaboration with renowned industrial designer Niels Diffrient, cemented Humanscale's spot among the big office furniture players, like Herman Miller, Steelcase, and Knoll. Combining extraordinary functionality with minimal manual controls, this innovative chair broke new ground in task seating. It also reinforced Diffrient and King's mutual passion for simple, functional design, which led to multiple future collaborations and a lifelong friendship. From Diffrient, says King, he learned the importance of restraint, which has become a mantra for Humanscale's minimalist and efficient designs.

“This idea of function drives everything,” explains King, who says he has no interest in trendy styles or decorative objects. Even as Humanscale’s product range expanded—from seating to task lighting to standing desks—King’s objectives remained the same: “What we do is to make products that enhance the human experience at work.”

“Sometimes I’ve said we worship the god of function,” says King, with a touch of humor. “We follow the functional problem as simply and elegantly as we can.” The resulting designs, he says, are “honest and timeless,” and never tied to a particular era or place.

That dedication to minimalism and worker wellness has been translated into an environmental philosophy that goes beyond most. Deeply embedded into the design process, ecological sensibility guides Humanscale’s market strategy as well as design, engineering, and manufacturing decisions. Life cycle assessments, design for disassembly, and recyclability are critical, while upgradability and replacement components lengthen the useful life of products, all of which ultimately reduce environmental impact.

If you’re King, healing the planet might start with a chair (like the Smart Ocean, which was designed using recycled fishing nets), but it doesn’t end there. Ever the problem solver, his ideal goes well beyond carbon neutrality. “Our goal is to have a net positive impact on the environment,” he says. With Smart Diffrient chair and Float table, in 2016 Humanscale became the first-ever manufacturer to receive Living Product Certification. This was no small task; the label indicates that products are manufactured with net-positive impact on water, energy, and the climate; contain no red-list chemicals; are designed for disassembly at the end of their useful life; and are equitably made. In other words, the furnishings aren’t just better than business as usual—they actually have a measurable positive ecological impact on planetary and human health.

Humanscale also uses upholstery without stain coatings, includes ingredient labeling, and has

removed all red-listed chemicals across its product offerings. This level of research and transparency represents a massive feat of both manufacturing and engineering that is almost unheard of in the industry. Yet despite the added costs this requires, last year Humanscale grew about 20% globally—much faster than the industry average.

Sustainability and worker health is, too, at the forefront of the brand’s own culture. Humanscale’s offices and showrooms are, of course, bright, clean spaces with access to nature, and employees enjoy multiple health-related bonuses. The company is aligned with multiple environmental organizations and labels, including a partnership with the World Wildlife Fund to restore the ecosystem in the eastern plains of Cambodia. The company’s deliberate approach suggests that business growth and environmental impact needn’t be at odds, but instead can be leveraged to effect positive change—from the built environment to the great outdoors.