



ergoCentric Founder and Chairman Terry Cassaday

ergoCentric Zeroes into Ergonomics

by David Lasker

Workers of the world, unite. You have the right to be seated comfortably. That could be the mission statement of **ergo-Centric Seating Systems**, based in the Toronto suburb of Mississauga. The company manufactures ergonomic task chairs, factory and healthcare seating and height-adjustable desks. Its growing American customer base includes major companies such as Apple, Microsoft, Nike and St. Louis-based BJC HealthCare Hospital Group, as well as the New York and Oregon state governments and the Kansas City, Mo., police.

The firm has two 48,000 square foot manufacturing plants, 170 staff members, and annual sales that have doubled over the past five years, between CDN \$50 and \$100-million (US\$38-72-million).

“We compete against the big guys – Herman Miller, Steelcase, Haworth, Knoll – and our prices are in that range,” said company founder and chairman **Terry Cassaday** during a recent factory tour. “We’re not a low-priced chair.”

Born in Hamilton, Ont., about midway between Toronto and Buffalo, Cassaday majored in economics and computer

science, and went to law school at the University of Western Ontario in London. There, he met his future wife, a physiotherapist. After five years of practicing law, specializing in internal discipline proceedings for professional associations, he started a business offering physiotherapy devices.

"I started off with a retail store where I was selling everybody else's chairs," he recalled. "If somebody came into the store who we couldn't fit, I'd try to find another chair. That went on until we started to make our own chairs.

"I never got into the furniture business, I was in the ergonomic chair business, which I consider more health-and-safety than furniture. I went into it designing chairs for the human anatomy."

That statement is understandable considering that in 1990, when he founded ergoCentric, ergonomic options were pretty slim pickings. The

default option, *faute de mieux*, was the Obusforme backrest.

"I knew Frank Roberts, who invented Obusforme," Cassaday said. "He had a back operation and when they took the cast off, he kept the back half. The Obusforme was basically the back half of his cast, which was the mould of a bad back. There was nothing else on the market. The good thing about it was that it was about three inches thick. All office chairs were made for men and the seats were too deep for women; that's why women sit on the front edge of the seat.

"If you put the Obusforme in your chair, you would effectively shorten the seat by three inches. So it had that value. But otherwise, I don't think it helped people, because you needed your angle opened up, and you needed lumbar support, and it didn't do either.

"Then Global made the Obusforme chair under license, and they sold a lot

of them. To me it proved that there was a market for a brand-name ergonomic chair. It just wasn't that great a chair." (Roberts was subsequently murdered by a professional hit man; the crime remains unsolved.)

Based on his experience, Cassaday saw an untapped market niche for a modular seating system.

"I realized how difficult it is to fit everybody. People's anatomies are so varied. Not just males and females of different heights and weights; you can take two people of the same height and same weight and they'll need quite different chairs. Everyone else was claiming that their chairs fit 95% of the population; it was more like 80%. We fit virtually 100% of our customers and their employees. If someone needs something we didn't have, we'd make it.

"Our 'thing' is, embracing diversity. 'Diversity' doesn't just mean people of different races and sexual orientation."

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Obesity highlights the diversity argument because no two supersize folks are big in the same places; their body shapes are, so to speak, non-standard. For these customers, “We had to relearn everything. The arms had to be way higher because they sit so much higher, and our chair arms can go off to the side. The bottom of the backrest has to be higher because they [the sitters] literally flow out there.

“My point on diversity is, when you allow an interior designer to specify the same chair for everybody, you’re literally telling 15% of your workers, ‘You’re not valued here.’”

He makes a strong polemical argument that’s bound to raise the hackles of manufacturers and specifiers in the office-furniture industry: “Other manufacturers were all about aesthetics; they didn’t really ‘get’ ergonomics. We were really the first ones in North America to be serious about ergonomic seating, and we stayed that way. We just came back from Work Expo in Paris and we don’t think anybody there, in

Europe, does what we’re doing.”

“Everybody else calls a chair ‘ergonomic’ if it has adjustments. That’s not necessarily what an ergonomist calls an ergonomically correct chair.”

“We work with ergonomists and occupational therapists. We think the **tCentric Hybrid** and **airCentric** are great-looking chairs, but we put ergonomics first and aesthetics second.”

Which is not to deny that they’re good-looking chairs, having been designed in collaboration with **Miles Keller**, owner of the Toronto industrial design firm **Dystil**, whose seating credits include Allseating’s Fluid chair, which made a Hollywood cameo

when William Hurt sits in one during a scene in Steven Spielberg’s 2001 sci-fi fantasy film *AI Artificial Intelligence*.

“Interior designers are just in a different world,” Cassaday said. “What’s the color for next year? ‘What’s the aesthetic for next year?’

“For instance, I showed our arm to an interior designer and she just laughed and said, ‘You people are idiots. That’s too bulky, no interior designer will ever specify that arm.’ We sell them all day, every day.” The patented swivel arm in question moves in and out and pivots 360 degrees versus the standard 30 degrees.

Another distinguishing ergoCentric trait is back and lumbar support. We’re so used to seeing the purported lumbar support that can slide up or down in a little track in the back of a

task chair. However, as Cassaday explained, this configuration will move the lumbar support out of ideal alignment

with respect to the chair back. “In everyone else’s mesh chair I’ve ever seen, the back itself does not go up and down. In our chairs, the whole back goes up or down.”

ergoCentric uses modular manufacturing, allowing the company to offer six standard seat sizes, as well as other options to allow for mass customization.



tCentric Hybrid Chair by ergoCentric



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“When you allow an interior designer to specify the same chair for everyone, you’re literally telling 15% of your workers, ‘You’re not valued here.’”

It also offers solutions for both bariatric and little people.

What other chair manufacturer can make such a claim?

“They don’t because interior designers will say, ‘I don’t want six seat sizes, that’s stupid.’ They convince the client, You don’t want the hassle of that.’

“My view is, it saves the company a ton of money because they don’t have staff needing [special] accommodation, going off on lost-time claims or needing a new chair

“So an interior designer comes in and gives the same chair to everybody. For at least 15%, if not more, the chair is absolutely terrible. How do they get away with this?”

Call it the intimidation factor. “People who are overweight or really skinny, short or tall think, ‘I must be weird. Everybody else seems to like their new chair. I won’t complain because it will embarrass me.’ Think about the very

overweight woman going to work: ‘I’m not going to fit in that chair. What am I going to do?’

“I spent an hour and a half with an interior designer once, explaining the stresses caused to the human body by the seated posture and how varied the population is and how you have to design a chair to reduce those stresses. When I was done, he said, ‘Yes, but a nice-looking chair makes people feel better too.’

ergoCentric became sole seating supplier to the City of Edmonton, capital of Alberta, when a consulting firm the city had hired to advise on procurement procedures told the city to stop doing tenders because the process was expensive and often chose the wrong product. Now, the city

partners with suppliers instead. Thus, was born ergoCentric’s **eCentric Executive** chair, created for the city’s 911 call centers.

Cassaday is also skeptical of chair auditions, another common, more informal procedure. “You can’t just bring in, ‘Try this chair.’ In fact, you can injure employees during that process and frustrate them. Yet, that’s what everybody does.”

Perhaps interior design schools should teach the Hippocratic oath’s *Primum non nocere* (First, do no harm).

This August, ergoCentric was a sponsor at the Association of Canadian Ergonomists New Horizons trade show in St. John’s, Newfoundland, and will have a booth at the National Ergonomics Conference & ErgoExpo in Las Vegas.



airCentric Chair by ergoCentric



Astronaut Dr. Roberta Bondar and ErgoCentric founder Terry Cassaday at the opening of ergoCentric’s new Toronto showroom earlier this spring. The new showroom is located on the ground floor of the historic King Edward Hotel, and the cocktail party featured an address by Dr. Roberta Bondar, Canada’s first female astronaut. She’s also a neurologist, author, photographer and impressively lively speaker.

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ergoCentric headquarters in Toronto

The company's "secret sauce" for ensuring growth is an aggressive approach to protecting their intellectual property with patents (20 and counting) and copyrights. For instance, three patents were assigned to the geometric-shaped adjustment paddles on chair bottoms: square for seat height, triangle for back angle, circle

for seat angle, diamond for seat slider and oval for seat height.

The mother necessity for this invention was a request from Bell Canada – Canada being bilingual – for paddle instructions to be written in French and English, which, of course, wouldn't fit on a paddle. Instead, easily identified instruction icons resembling wayfinding signage

are clearly visible on each paddle. Their different shapes differentiate the chairs' adjustment controls, helping users learn to recognize an adjustment option simply by feeling the paddle's shape.

ergoCentric is a company that knows its strength – authentic ergonomics – and is intent on spreading that passion to all who sit in its chairs. ■



ergoCentric headquarters in Toronto



Lots of business flying through the ergoCentric factory