

The Business of Furniture | March 14, 2018

# BOF

When it  
Comes to  
Manufacturing,  
9to5 Rivals  
its Innovative  
Neighbors

## HIGHLIGHTS

### **10** UPFRONT: **Steelcase says Steel Tariffs will impact them**

The company says it does purchase most of its raw steel domestically but some material they need is not available in the US. As a result, the company is likely to experience negative financial impact.

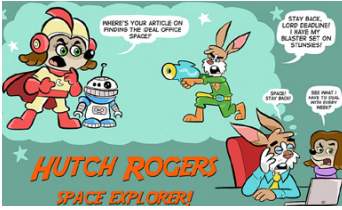
### **12** Rainlight Spawns **from HOK Product Design Success**

Grossinger and Lykouria met in 2014 and founded Rainlight that year to create an integrated studio spanning London and Los Angeles.

### **48** Sustainable Wood **Products Helps Abcor Grow Strong Roots**

The company began as a subsidiary of Herman Miller. Its technology first was launched in 1999 as Formcoat, part of Herman Miller's Resolve furniture system.

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## 12 | Rainlight Spawns from HOK Product Design Success

Grossinger and Lykouria met in 2014 and founded Rainlight that year to create an integrated studio spanning London and Los Angeles.



## 20 | The Battle for Benz

The Hülsta Group decided to sell the subsidiary to the Jason Group. With the acquisition, this large furniture producer in China takes one of its first steps in Europe.



## 38 | When it Comes to Manufacturing, 9to5 Rivals its Innovative Neighbors

9to5 is literally surrounded by Elon Musk's SpaceX, the billionaire's idea for a private rocket company and other high tech ideas. Most importantly, the neighbors are friendly.

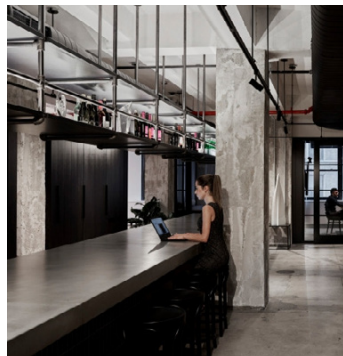


## 48 | Sustainable Wood Products Helps Abcor Grow Strong Roots

The company began as a subsidiary of Herman Miller. Its technology first was launched in 1999 as Formcoat, part of Herman Miller's Resolve furniture system, to provide a healthier surface option with a different aesthetic compared to laminate.



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**Editor-in-Chief, Bellow Press** Rob Kirkbride

**Vice President, Sales & Marketing, Publisher, Bellow Press** Melissa Skolnick

**Vice President, Content Production, Bellow Press** Todd Hardy

**Workplace Guru, BoF** Stephen Viscusi

**Guest Columnist, BoF** Jeremy Erard

**Guest Columnist, BoF** Al Everett

**Contributing Writers, BoF:**

Amanda Schneider, Emily Clingman, Bruce Buursma, John Q. Horn, Jeremy Myerson,  
Stef Schwalb, Gary James, Scott Lesizza, Bryce Stuckenschneider, Michael Dunlap, Carolyn Cirillo

**Illustrator, BoF** Jamie Cosley

**Copy Editor, BoF** Linda Odette

**Publishing Headquarters**

23403 E Mission Ave, Suite 107  
Liberty Lake, Washington 99019  
877-BELLOW9 (877-235-5699)  
**Email:** info@bellow.press

Include us on your PR distribution list.

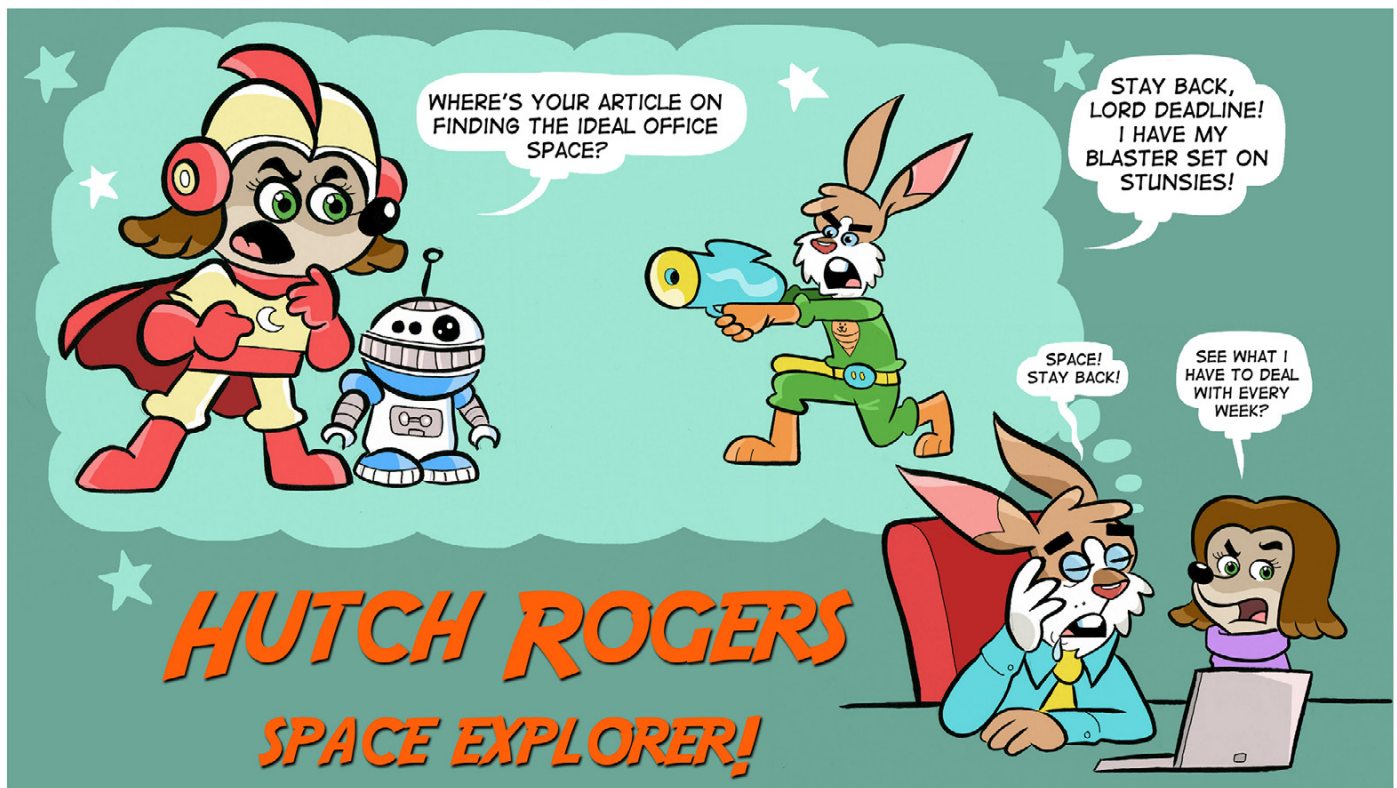
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**ROB KIRKBRIDE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**



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9to5  
seating



*Dara Mir, President with Founders Susan Mir and Darius Mir*

MAKERS

## When it Comes to Manufacturing, 9to5 Rivals its Innovative Neighbors

9TO5 IS LITERALLY SURROUNDED BY ELON MUSK'S SPACEX, THE BILLIONAIRE'S IDEA FOR A PRIVATE ROCKET COMPANY AND OTHER HIGH TECH IDEAS. THE NEIGHBORS ARE FRIENDLY.

BY ROB KIRKBRIDE

# W

orkers pick parts and put them in totes the size of large suitcases that roll along a conveyor system in 9to5 Seating's Hawthorne, California, plant. Barcodes on the side shuttle the bins to the proper work cells and give the company real-time information on where a customer's chair is in the manufacturing process.

It is one of the most high-tech and smartly designed seating plants in the world and a big reason 9to5 is able to create mass-customized products in a surprisingly short time frame.

The plant and headquarters in the Los Angeles community compliment the company's Franklin, Tennessee, operations, which 9to5 continues to build out and refine. Franklin supplies many parts and components for the Hawthorne plant and will eventually be used to make products for the East Coast and Midwest.

"When this (Hawthorne) plant was built (in 2009), we went through what our customers go through," says Dara Mir, 9to5's president. "Very early on we went for LEED Gold as a manufacturer. We added photovoltaic cells to the roof. We were an early adopter and the first LEED Gold manufacturer in the South Bay."

It is a headquarters and plant the company is proud of, from the owners to the 180 people who work there. It was also a tremendous investment for 9to5, as Hawthorne has become one of the most sought-after manufacturing locations in Southern California.

Innovation seems to be in the water at Hawthorne. In perhaps the best real estate decision ever made in the office furniture industry, 9to5 bought a piece of land there in the mid-2000s after a property developer abandoned a project. The once-desolate area where the aerospace industry had been was cheap property no one in Los Angeles seemed to want, but it was perfect for 9to5 with easy access to LAX and the docks in Long Beach.

It also was perfect for Elon Musk and SpaceX, the billionaire's idea for a private rocket company with audacious plans to go to Mars and create reusable rockets that could be launched and landed. SpaceX became 9to5's neighbor. At the time, SpaceX had about 300 employees. The campus now has 5,000 employees. It also houses Tesla's testing facility and Musk's latest venture, The Boring Company, which will make tunnels and "Hyperloops" that Musk believes will enable rapid transit across densely populated regions.

9to5 is literally surrounded by Musk's high tech ideas and the neighbors are friendly. The company happily accommodates SpaceX for parking at its after-hours events and even occasionally lets trucks unload on its shipping docks. The finished rockets

literally emerge through an overhead door right next to 9to5's building. When they are shipped, 9to5 makes room for them. Musk's real estate folks come knocking regularly to ask if 9to5 is ready to sell. And though the company's owners could probably comfortably retire on the real estate sale alone, they aren't ready to move.

That's because the plant is so efficient. From the high-tech fabric and leather cutting systems that virtually eliminate all waste to a centralized location that makes it relatively easy for 9to5 workers to commute from all over Los Angeles, Hawthorne is home for the foreseeable future, even though it is using nearly every available space in the plant.



Two mezzanines were recently built at 9to5, adding 42,000 square feet of space to the 105,000 square feet it already had. The mezzanines are served by the aforementioned conveyor system that automatically ships products up — using an automated elevator system — as well as around the plant.

9to5 believes in vertical integration and efficiency, a philosophy also shared by its well-heeled neighbors. The plant is also efficient from an energy perspective — a computer in the lobby shows how much energy and trees have been saved. Darius Mir, who founded the company along with his wife, Susan, says he enjoys receiving an occasional check from the electric company for extra power 9to5 supplies the grid. The plant is also efficient in how it makes products and works. A model of efficiency, it is designed to produce 2,600 chairs a day, which the company is quickly ramping up to.

“This system allows us to do every work order as a custom chair,” Dara Mir says. “There are so many different ways for our customers to customize our products and many of them ship in as little as two days.”





9to5 continues to focus on efforts to bring manufacturing back to the U.S. through the Hawthorne and Franklin plants. “It is part of our duty as responsible manufacturers,” Darius Mir says. “We are able to do it because of our huge reliance on technology. Since 2014, we have come a very long way in Franklin. We are hiring people there at all levels. And we are able to create higher quality furniture and components at equal or less than what we could in China.”

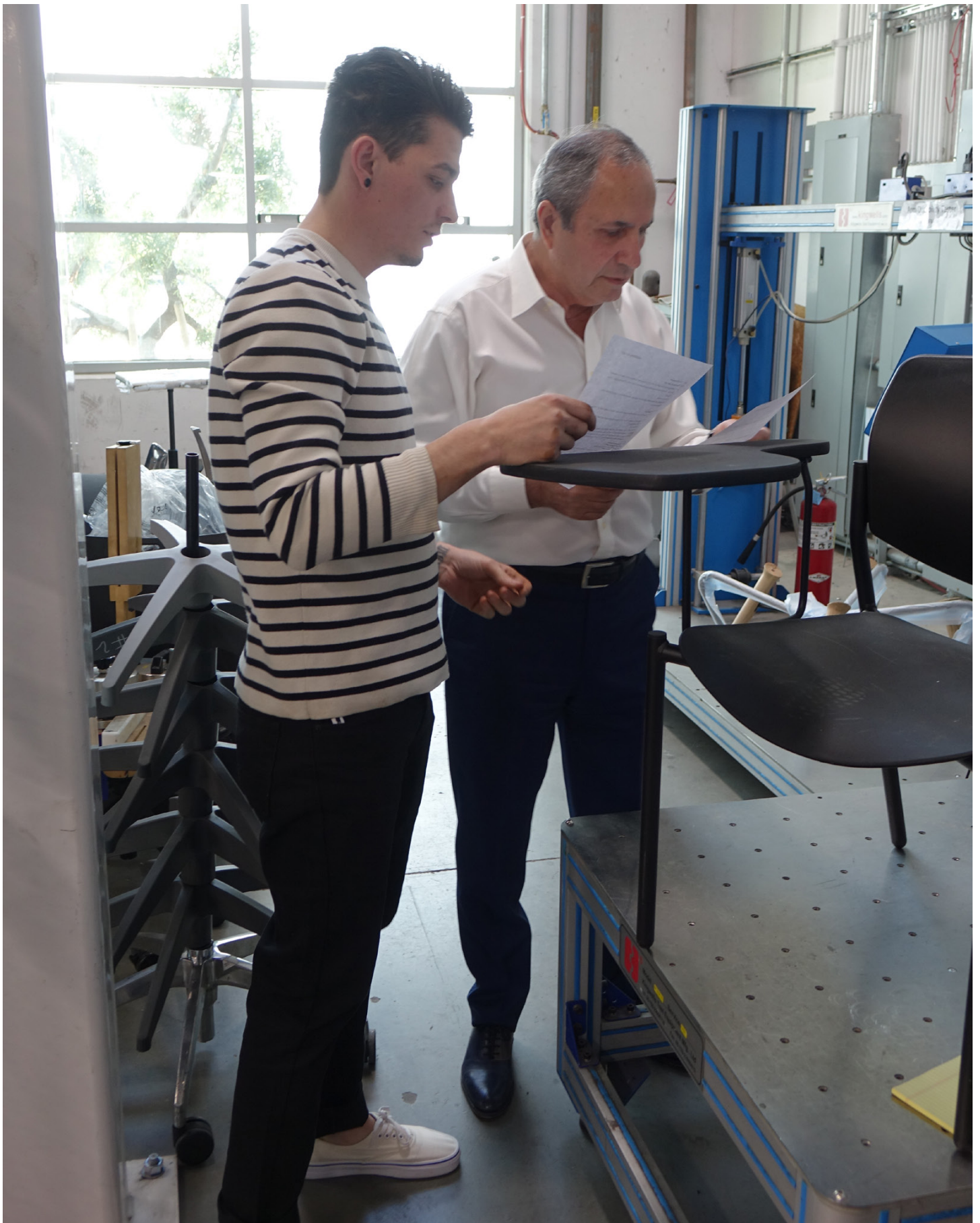
Franklin’s plant can supply the Hawthorne plant and even sell some components back to customers in China. Everything from creating molds to aluminum casting is done in-house. 9to5 is radically, vertically integrated. Tubular metal is bent in-house for frames as is plastic injection molding.

“After 34 years in business, we have learned a lot about great quality and what it takes to make seating,” Darius Mir says. “We have also learned what it takes to bring manufacturing back to the U.S. 9to5 is probably the first office furniture maker in the industry to move production back to the U.S.”

The political climate helps, says Dara Mir, though like many in the industry, he is concerned about talk of tariffs on metals.

The company focuses entirely on seating and does it well. It is upping its game by adding several new chairs to its portfolio that will attract the design community without breaking its customer’s budgets.











The new seating products coming out not only are cost effective, but boost 9to5's design image as well. They are smartly designed, sleek and well built, attributes not always found in the mid-market. "All of these chairs show that we have high design at a good value," says Mark Mark Mannon, director of product and market development.

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## THE NEW SEATING PRODUCTS COMING OUT NOT ONLY ARE COST EFFECTIVE, BUT BOOST 9TO5'S DESIGN IMAGE AS WELL. THEY ARE SMARTLY DESIGNED, SLEEK AND WELL BUILT, ATTRIBUTES NOT ALWAYS FOUND IN THE MID-MARKET.

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9to5 entered the lounge furniture market last year with Sophie, a product that works well in waiting areas and other casual meeting spots. This year, it is adding Lilly, another collaborative lounge product that moves the design needle even more toward the resimercial end of the spectrum. Lilly has a fiberglass shell and uses overmolded foam for a comfortable sit. It has four base options that dramatically change the look. A side chair and stool will be added to the collection later this year.

Luna is a new task chair that can be dressed up or down depending on how it's used. Features include textured arm pads, adjustable optional lumbar and aluminum detailing on the back. There are four synchro mechanisms, two of them weight balanced. The starting list price for the chair is \$475; \$540 with arms. 9to5 began taking orders for Luna last week and begins shipping them this week.

Neo is described as equal parts design, comfort and value. It has six-way adjustable arms, a seat slider that comes standard and comes in white and gray in plastic and mesh. It lists for \$375; \$450 with arms.

Mimi is 9to5's new stacking chair with a sleek, modern design. It comes in a four-leg or sled base and is available in 12 colors. The back is split to add flexibility and pelvic support. Up to 40 can be stacked in its sled base configuration. Designers also can add an upholstered seat for even more comfort. Mimi begins shipping in April and lists at \$175; \$220 with arms. **BoF**