

# Wilkhahn

Responsible  
Furniture for  
Professional Life

## Background

Wilkhahn offers premium office solutions for conferencing, individual workplaces and informal communication areas. It is the company's dedication to high quality in furniture design and manufacturing that saw them turn into a globally recognised brand employing today 600 people worldwide, with over 70% of sales realised outside their home country of Germany. Still family-owned today, the Wilkhahn approach to design has since maintained an unaltered core – to realise attractive quality products for professional users in a sustainable manner.

The company's international success is built around this incremental approach to consider environmental and social responsibility in the early design phase. Conference tables and office chairs are consequently designed for longevity, easy-to-dismount-and-repair, applying exclusive, safe and environmentally friendly materials and accurate manufacturing methods. But excellence in design goes beyond technical parameters: to extend a product's life, people's ergonomic and aesthetic needs are considered right from the start, and a Wilkhahn product is meant to satisfy, support and accompany its user for a long time. At end-of-first life, Wilkhahn will offer repair, remanufacture or take back for recycling, should the need arise.



“Our aim is to develop sustainable products, to increase their utility value and reduce waste”

Design approach embraced by Wilkhahn since the 1960's



This exemplary approach to product responsibility and design have seen Wilkhahn receive numerous high calibre design awards globally. Criteria for evaluation of these awards include innovative content, user-friendliness and aesthetics, as well as environmental compatibility, longevity and reparability – highlighting sustainable design needs no loss of quality elsewhere. Awards include CSD Minerva award, London; iF Design 'Die Besten der Branche' (Best of the Industry), Hanover, and Compasso d'oro, Milano, Italy.

## The process

Service is key for Wilkhahn. To ensure optimal life is achieved by pieces of furniture, maintenance visits are offered as part of some contracts when purchasing goods. This provides the customer with three visits by Wilkhahn service technicians within a period of five years – periodical checks to keep the products in best working order and, if necessary, to draw attention to needed repairs. Using this proactive approach, more serious product restorations may be avoided, and end-of-first-life is extended.

Once a client is at the point of disposal, be it due to general wear and tear or breakage, Wilkhahn will offer either repair of product, or reworking. Remanufacture brings the product back up to original specifications, replacing or repairing worn or damaged components. If necessary, the item can be replaced entirely with a reworked piece, though this is not a particularly common practice – customers tend to prefer reworking own pieces over replacement. If a customer simply has no need for a product further, then Wilkhahn offer a take back scheme, with guaranteed take back for several of the ranges – such as Picto, FS-Line and Modus ranges.

Other models may also be taken back, on request.



The recovered pieces are disassembled at the production plant, with useable items cleaned, repaired if necessary, and put back together as remanufactured products. Items that are not suitable for recovery as a whole will be stripped of working components then separated into pure materials for recycling. Again, these processes are made easier due to incremental consideration of end-of-life at the product's design stage, with design for disassembly ensuring components are assembled in ways which allow for non-destructive dismantling and pure and recyclable materials used where possible.

Although office chairs are most frequently recovered, individual tables, or even whole conference settings can be reworked as well. Wilkhahn assesses each situation individually and provides the client with the aesthetically, technically and financially most feasible options for their specific needs – which may be remanufacture or simply a refurbish as necessary.

“Why should you part with good old chairs, if they can be repaired at reasonable costs?”



## Why?

Wilkhahn has been recognised as a pioneer in including ecological aspects in furniture production for many years. More than two decades ago the Wilkhahn Administrative Board decided that in case of doubt, the ecological aspect has priority over quick profit. What at that time has been qualified as a certain shrewdness by many is, at closer look, a consequent widening of the company's responsibility policy. Today, Wilkhahn production is EMAS and ISO 9001/14001 certified, the design process adheres to ecological principles, and a co-generating heat-and-power-plant running on plant oils effectively minimises climate gas emissions at the main production site in Bad Muender, Germany. As a member of the UN Global Compact Wilkhahn works towards safe and healthy working environments, at their own and also at suppliers' level. The fact that Wilkhahn is a family-run company helped to translate its core values into the emerging global contexts.

Wilkhahn tries to bring environmental and resource efficiency principles to all areas of the company, and this includes product design and use, with product life extension being one of the most effective ways of minimising resource use, second perhaps only to eliminating unnecessary inputs while designing a new product. Customers can access information pertaining to resources and environmental credibility for all major Wilkhahn ranges. The corporate website's section "Green" therefore displays data sheets prepared in accordance to ISO 14020<sup>1</sup>, and the annually updated EMAS environmental declaration adds production related key environmental figures.

## Design

Sustainability is a priority for Wilkhahn, and this applies to all stages of the life cycle of the product. Ecological impact of resources used is considered in the design stage, yet so is reparability and ease of disassembly. As well as excluding prohibited chemicals as standard, Wilkhahn also implement their own stringent controls of materials used, ensuring no substances are used that may be hazardous to health or environment, and this is regulated by use of ABC analysis which restricts the use of chemicals and materials judged to be unsuitable. The ABC analysis has lead to several innovations in design, including a sophisticatedly handcrafted seat cover, which was designed into the Modus swivel chair. This not only allows for easy disassembly at end-of-life, but also makes the chemical adhesive typically used in lower quality chair production, unnecessary.

<sup>1</sup>ISO 14020 is a standard set by the International Standards Organisation, setting out principles for the accurate, verifiable and relevant use of environmental claims.

"In case of doubt, the ecological aspect has priority over quick profit."

Mission Statement of the Wilkhahn Administrative Board, 1989



## Remanufacturing – Barriers and Incentives

As a company offering premium office solutions, with clients often large, image aware corporations, the sale of remanufactured furniture can be difficult. Customers want to have the latest innovations, and often have an inaccurate perception of ‘lower quality’ in remanufactured items. To overcome this, Wilkhahn offer the ‘service’ above the ‘product’, with, typically, clients own products having a life extension process carried out, rather than taking back items and reselling them to new customers. This is offered as well when necessary, but by keeping remanufacture in house, the resource and environmental costs are reduced as well.

Theoretically, larger scale resale of remanufactured furniture is possible, but it is not something Wilkhahn is expecting to succeed in the current market of premium office interiors. Here, corporate identity issues are rather growing in importance, and remanufactured furniture might not always meet the customers’ premium needs. One constraint is the presently limited number of suitable pieces for remanufacture. Larger operations currently cannot be supplied with remanufactured furniture at a sustainable level.

Resale of remanufactured goods does occur, though more often on a small scale. In particular, financial savings can be apparent, and small enterprises and individuals are able to purchase good quality chairs – with warranty – which they may not have been able to otherwise afford.

The most typically requested services are for the more iconic chairs, and therefore cheaper, less high quality products created with shorter life expectancy, have very little value in remanufacturing. This is overcome by quality of production and design, and often results in cost savings for the long term as the product needs infrequent replacement. Wilkhahn design durability into their products, so they lend themselves easily into remanufacture.

‘Less is more’ or ‘reduce to the max’ are the guiding principles that Wilkhahn translates into future contexts every time anew’

## The future

Wilkhahn have seen a marked increase in requests for remanufacture of office furniture over recent years. They plan to continue to actively promote the remanufacture and reuse of furniture, through service to clients where possible, but via take back and resale where not.

Reworking of high quality office furniture is perceived to be an important cornerstone for sustainability at the workplace. Producing responsible furniture for professional life entails that all new products follow the principles of easy repair and disassembly after use. Using recycled content in new furniture is another design strategy growing in importance, and both concepts can work together effectively to ensure truly sustainable furniture.

