



## HERE'S WHY WORKRITE ACQUIRED ISE

THE ACQUISITION OF ISE GIVES THE COMPANY AN IMMEDIATE EAST COAST AND MIDWEST PRESENCE TO ADD TO WORKRITE'S STRONG ROOTS ON THE WEST COAST. **BY ROB KIRKBRIDE**

**W**hen Workrite Ergonomics announced it had acquired ISE, it caused a ripple through the ergonomic furniture and accessory market. Jointly, the two companies on opposite coasts — Workrite in California and ISE in Toronto — create an ergonomic juggernaut.

Yet these two companies have strong historical ties and, according to Workrite President Charles Lawrence, Workrite and ISE are almost mirror reflections of each other. To understand these connections, one has to dig into the history of both companies.

ISE was originally called Sit-Rite Seating. The first West

Coast rep for Sit-Rite was Ray Hendricksen, one of the founders of Workrite. Hendricksen and Shaffique Verjee, who founded Sit-Rite (later to become ISE), had a gentlemen's agreement. ISE would work east of the Mississippi River, and Workrite would work west of it. As Workrite grew at a faster rate than ISE, that agreement dissolved and the two became competitors sharing a common culture and commitment to ergonomics.

Lawrence said Workrite had been working on creating an East Coast distribution center for the last six months. The acquisition of ISE gives the company an immediate East Coast and Midwest

presence to add to Workrite's strong roots on the West Coast.

The strategic reasons for the acquisition are many, but one is the added connections ISE brings into the combined companies. "This is still a relationship business," Lawrence said, "and we've now tripled the number of belly buttons we have in the marketplace. They have some very strong rep agencies they work with, we have strong relationships with others. There's really not a lot of duplication, which is a positive thing."

The combined Workrite/ISE will have a much stronger presence with end users, influencers and dealers with its much-expanded portfolio of products.

One of those products that will help Workrite is the Line-of-Sight products from ISE that open up the educational and training markets. This “adds 20 percent to Workrite overnight,” Lawrence said. Adding products for the university, corporate training — and eventually K-12 — has huge potential for the combined companies, he noted. Corporate customers understand the importance of ergonomics; the next logical extension is the educational market, Lawrence said.

The two companies will continue to operate independently but with the obvious connections through the acquisition. Lawrence said Workrite and ISE will act as “centers of excellence,” with Petaluma the center of excellence for keyboard platforms and trays, and Toronto the center of excellence in training and education products.

ISE also helps Workrite because it has capabilities for customization and quick turn projects. Lawrence said he is excited about blending the inventories as. “Clearly, we are the largest seller of sit-stand (products) with the blended company,” he said.

The two companies are working with five height-adjustable table component makers. Lawrence wants to streamline its supplier network. “The question is: Who wants to partner with the leader in this category?” he said.

From a practical standpoint, there are benefits. Since ISE is in Eastern Standard Time, cus-

tomers service reps from Workrite don’t have to arrive in the office at 5 a.m. on the West Coast. But it is on the sales side that Lawrence sees real potential. “Basically, we have been able to triple the number of people touching the customer,” he said. “How we blend that group will be interesting, and there is a lot of potential there.”

There are no plans to disrupt either business, in terms of management or employment. CEO Jay Verjee and his father, Shaffique Verjee, will continue to help guide ISE. Lawrence said there are many cultural similarities you don’t often find in acquisitions.

“Shaffique has all the tribal knowledge and built that company from nothing. He was the founder of ISE’s educational product line, so he will be a real resource,” Lawrence said. “Jay is a bright young leader; an approachable guy who has been a pleasure to work with.”

It will take several months for the companies to start seeing the real benefits from the acquisition. Both will have new products at NeoCon in their separate showrooms. But in coming months, the combined Workrite-ISE will be a major force in ergonomics and height adjustability.

“As you can probably sense in my voice, I’m really excited about this,” Lawrence said. “Everyone in Petaluma is excited. Whenever you grow, you create opportunities for people. I think everyone can see that.”

Ergonomics is the constant

that has guided Workrite since its founding in a Novato, Calif., in Hendricksen’s garage in 1991. Hendricksen, Tom James and Brenda Hartley were the entrepreneurs who created it. At first it was concerned with the health of factory and warehouse workers. Lift improperly, and it could cause injuries and health issues. Ergonomics in the office came later when workers began sitting for hours in front of computer screens and pecking away all day on keyboards.

It was at this time and place that Workrite Ergonomics was founded. Computers were invading the office, but no one knew devices like the keyboard and computer mouse would affect the health of the workers. Workrite Ergonomics started with a few simple products: the wrist rest — a tube that would sit in front of the worker’s keyboard to support the wrist; and an anti-glare screen for CRTs. In 1993, an order for 500 WristResters was sold to a national insurance company based in Bloomington, Ill. One of Workrite’s first customers was an up-and-coming tech company named Cisco.

Place always has been an important ingredient to Workrite’s success. When the company grew too large for the garage, it moved into a series of larger facilities, all in the Marin or Sonoma county region around San Francisco. The company has called Petaluma, Calif., home for more than 10 years. **BoF**