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TODAY: NeoCon East

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by [Rob Kirkbride](#)

NeoCon East seems to be a show where you can make lemonade out of lemons. Consider: Last year, the show succeeded despite a crippling government shutdown. It has survived losing some major exhibitors (Haworth isn't in Baltimore and none of the HNI Corp. companies are either). And yet, here it is, NeoCon East 2014 with a full convention center and organizers grinning ear to ear.

Some of the exhibitors have made the best of a tough situation as well. Consider Office Master. The shipper responsible for getting the California company's booth supplies to the Baltimore Convention Center lost the container somewhere along the way. Oops.



Luckily the seating company's chairs arrived, but little else made it. No carpet, no tools, no booth graphics. So Office Master staffers sprung into action and had new graphics printed and new marketing materials made. Wilson Chow shrugged it off. "It's all come together for us," said the Office Master leader. "You just have to work with what you have."

After suffering through the government shutdown last year, NeoCon East crowds were back on the show's first day Wednesday. There were government buyers from the Department of Defense, designers from around the East Coast, dealers from the area and college students, all looking for inspiration from the hundreds of exhibitors that filled the floor.

And for the most part, they found it. Most of the exhibitors rehashed what was already unveiled at NeoCon in Chicago. In their defense, most of those attending this show did not attend NeoCon in Chicago. This isn't just a government furniture show anymore. In fact, there seem to be more designers and dealers from the region than government buyers.

The best booth design has to go to JSI. The Jasper-based furniture maker took one of the largest spaces in the convention center and put it to good use showing off new products like its Be Collection of lounge furniture. The space was warm and inviting and did a great job showing off its products.

"We are taking more space while some companies are taking less or no space at all," said Ashley Werner, who leads JSI's marketing efforts. "We are investing in our Washington, D.C. showroom, which will open soon and focusing on some of our key markets, which includes the Washington-Baltimore area."

Global also had a huge booth. In fact, the booth size seems proportional to the company's amount of government furniture sales.



Many at the show were talking about HNI Corp. and its stable of companies skipping NeoCon East this year. Apparently, all of them were at W.B. Mason's show, which is an important East Coast distributor. But they were not at NeoCon East for the first time in many years. Haworth was absent as well. Still, most of the largest companies were in attendance, including Steelcase, Herman Miller and Knoll, all of which have strong government sales.

It is hard to tell which direction the show is headed. On one hand, crowds were stronger on the first day than in several years. The government is buying furniture again and the economy is robust, especially on the East Coast. Still, the loss of HNI and Haworth is a blow. Rumor has it that Steelcase threatened to pull out of the show but was wooed back in by a sweet deal from MMPI, which organizes NeoCon East.

The aisles seem a bit wider than in past years and more flooring companies and ancillary product makers are represented, replacing some of the office furniture makers that used to attend.

It is not that the show is empty or sparsely populated. If anything, exhibitors like that NeoCon East isn't as mobbed at its Chicago counterpart. "It is a great show," said Robin Hendrick Lane of Sparkeology, which is making its first appearance at NeoCon East. "It is just so doable. With NeoCon, you can get stuck on one floor all day and never make it to see everyone you want to see."





Neutral Posture isn't new to NeoCon East, but the company is showing off its trophy for the first time -- the Equity system that it recently purchased from Knoll. Neutral Posture also is the only company there with a seat back filled with bullet slug. The company has a chair with a removable seat back that acts as a bullet-proof vest. A field-test seat back vest was on display on its stand with bullet holes in it (the vest worked -- the bullets didn't pass through). Apparently the company believes government buyers might need them if an office is "attacked."

For JRB Studio, NeoCon East is about connecting with its local dealers from Maryland, Virginia and the Washington, D.C. area, said Chief Executive Officer Charles Martin. "I think for many dealers it is a lot cheaper to get people here than it is to get them to Chicago," he said. "It gives all of those folks a chance to see what they didn't in Chicago in June."

Ghent was showing off its new Link board collection in Baltimore, a product it gave a peek of in Chicago. Like many companies who show products in Chicago in June, NeoCon East falls at a time when they actually start taking orders and shipping those new products.

"The GSA connections to this show definitely do not hurt," said Bryce Stuckenschneider, Ghent's marketing manager. "We have really strong representation on the East Coast as well. These new products make a lot of sense, institutionally (for government buyers)."



NeoCon East has a strong Canadian presence as well. In addition to Global, Teknion, Nightingale and ISE showed at the event, to name a few. Toronto-based ISE was showing off its Line-of-Sight desk, an educational product where the computer screen electronically tucks into the surface. It also showed its Rise adjustable-height table line.

No one is expecting crowds on Thursday the same size as attended NeoCon East on Wednesday. Still, if trends continue and the show gets some percentage of attendees on the second day, NeoCon East 2014 will go down as one of the best in recent years. Maybe there is a place for a regional, long-lasting NeoCon show.

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Herman Miller	N/A +0.00	N/A	N/A	N/A	10/29/2014 4:00pm
HNI	N/A +0.00	N/A	N/A	N/A	10/29/2014 4:02pm
Knoll, Inc.	N/A +0.00	N/A	N/A	N/A	10/29/2014 4:02pm
Steelcase	N/A +0.00	N/A	N/A	N/A	10/29/2014 4:05pm
Teknion	N/A +0.00	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A N/A
Vornado Realty	N/A +0.00	N/A	N/A	N/A	10/29/2014 4:05pm

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