# Groupe Lacasse Shifts to Address Changing Office

by Rob Kirkbride

**No one would have wished for a worldwide pandemic.** But no company in the office furniture industry might be better positioned to respond to the needs of both the work-from-home and the traditional office than Groupe Lacasse.

The Quebec-based manufacturer has done a masterful job of shifting gears to address the crisis, first by coming out with a package of furniture for the home office and by creating products that make office work safer as well.

Soon after the pandemic hit, the Groupe Lacasse team gathered (virtually) to come up with solutions for workers suddenly pushed into inadequate home offices and next for companies that want to reopen but don't know how to keep their workers safe. The company's response also benefited from its use of the latest edgebanding technology which creates an attractive table edge that is easily cleanable and keeps out germs.


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"The first reaction across the board with our employees and with people we knew and what we were observing with other people being forced to stay home, was the necessity in many cases to let our people work from their homes," said Sylvain Garneau, chairman and chief executive officer. "Very quickly it became a critical agenda item, that this shutdown is going to last much longer than anticipated and that it is going to require us to adapt to an uncertain working environment, indeed an uncertain future — just like all our customers."

Home office became a fast focus as its products already lent themselves to the category. Since Groupe Lacasse has so much manufacturing experience making custom products, it was easy to transition some production to a home office offering — slightly smaller in scale, but still the same commercial quality the company is known for. It was important Groupe Lacasse still serve home office customers for its dealer network, so it made sure to include its partners in the design, marketing and sales of the products.

Groupe Lacasse's home office planning started before COVID-19, said Dominic Aubry, product manager for laminate casegoods. "We spend a great deal of our time imagining the future and how it impacts our daily business, which underpins our





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long-term product development plan, and working from home was already part of that plan," he said. "So we were already contemplating what that would look like. What changed was the impact of COVID-19 and the speed at which people were required to work from home. Obviously, many companies shutdown completely, and many businesses who remained open had no choice but to send their employees home to work virtually."

What started as a temporary setting became more long term as the crisis went on. For most new work-from-home employees, it might have started with a dining table or a small spot in the living room. As the weeks working from home have turned to months, home office workers started to look for a more permanent solution. Some companies have decided not to bring workers back to the traditional office at all. Others are opting to split workers into different shifts or have them work from home a few days a week.

"We believe that when everyone gets the green-light to return to work, there may not be room for them because physical distancing rules will apply," Aubry said. "In order to make room, many companies will keep their employees virtual asking them to work from a remote setting. Not only that, we believe some businesses may even realize financial or productivity gains to having employees working remotely, making this more than a short-term trend."

Prior to the pandemic, many companies were reluctant to try work from home because they might have less control or the work might not be as efficient. Since they were forced to try it, some of them are seeing the advantages and could keep the concept. That's why Groupe Lacasse believes working





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remotely and working from home will continue to be a strong trend in the months and years ahead.

Groupe Lacasse started by looking at the different characteristics and particularities of the market. A sure way to fail would be to introduce commercial products and simply throw them into the home and believe it would be a perfect fit. There are differences in the markets. The first thing the company observed was the size differences and space configurations.

"There is a significant difference between the residential and the commercial markets," Aubry said. "If you have ever tried to fit a 36-by-72-inch desk with a credenza, a hutch and a lateral file, maybe even a bookcase, obviously it won't easily fit in most residential spaces. So we started to think about scalable furniture, with different configurations in support of residential space restrictions in order to be more efficient on a square footage basis and take more advantage of wall space, certain not to block windows, closets and doorways."

Also the general aesthetic and feel of the furniture has to be different. Nobody wants ugly furniture, especially at home. The aesthetic was slightly more important in residential furniture, Groupe Lacasse found, because furniture participates in the décor of the house. And obviously some market conditions like price and delivery time were very important because in many cases, the end user is going to pay for the furniture. So Groupe Lacasse came up with a solution that is really reasonably priced.

The industry hasn't done a great job serving the home office market, said Kevin Glynn, executive vice president of sales. He said the industry has left it to the likes of Wayfair and IKEA and ready-to-assemble furniture makers.

"What we did to address it was to introduce products that are not ready-to-assemble, but primarily come already assembled, and with a level of service online big box stores simply can't provide," he said. "And we're not selling direct (to consumers); we're offering our dealer partners the ability to sell home office furniture to their clients. We do not sell online; we truly support our bricks and mortar dealers, the traditional commercial dealer market. That's who we're always








going to support with Groupe Lacasse products and services. We have taken a BIFMA-certified product and scaled it to fit a smaller, dedicated home office environment wonderfully well. You can't have the same scale of product — it would overwhelm a relatively small space that you're dedicating your home-based office furniture to."

But it's not scaled back in terms of quality, he said. It's going to be the same quality with the same commercial warranties, which in Groupe Lacasse's case is a limited lifetime warranty.

"You're getting a tremendous quality product, with great design, at an affordable price, scaled to suit the home office," Glynn said. "That's been our goal, and we've just released it to the market. It will be available through Groupe Lacasse authorized dealers."

Groupe Lacasse found its niche — a collection of home office furniture that was commercially tough and could be used eight hours a day, stylish enough to work in a home and at a price point that won't break the bank for a home worker who might have to purchase the products themselves.

The next step was to imagine how the office itself might change. For the last decade, open space, benching, desking, long surfaces and getting as many people as possible in the least amount of square footage was the rule. Now, the opposite is true. Space is needed, as are personal protection accessories at workstations, along with panels and screens for physical separation in benching or desking solutions.

Regardless of when or how offices reopen, they will be different than they were in the past, Garneau said. But the company did not want to create products simply to chase the post-COVID trends. It wanted to create products that its dealers could sell and customers could buy that would







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help employees work regardless of the situation.

"Now, 12 months from now, are we going to be back to normal? I have no clue, I don't know," Garneau said. "It's still too early. The only thing I know is that employers are looking at what they can do to safely bring their people back. They're looking at solutions. And what we want to do is to provide a functional yet unobtrusive product solution that meets the needs of a post COVID-19 workspace, that provides for the well-being and safety of the employees well into the future should another wave of the virus ever materialize. It's intended to help employers and employees to get back into normal work mode, or a new normal, and again be safe and secure where they are. This is what we had in mind."

Physical distancing will certainly be important as people return to the office. Garneau said Groupe Lacasse was inspired by documents on staying safe in the workplace, visions from architecture and design firms and projections from the real estate industry. The company got to work.

After just four weeks, they have developed solutions for casegoods, systems and seating they can bundle together that can be extremely helpful in the near term for its dealer network, either for retrofitting the current setups employers have with screens and panels that can divide and make separations or for new setups.

It wasn't easy. Design has to happen. Product engineering has to happen. The supply chain has to participate (and just as fast as Groupe Lacasse). The company used what it called a stage gate process for new products or enhancements/improve-







ments — a methodic step-by-step system. "Obviously, in this case, we shrank everything," Garneau said.

Groupe Lacasse has benefited from its continuous investment in the latest technology. The company made massive investments in 2018 and 2019. Those investments are paying off. Without the high-tech manufacturing, Groupe Lacasse would not be able to move as quickly as it has or provide as many options for shapes and materials.

The company is the first to introduce laser technology for edge banding on laminate surfaces. Though this might seem like a minor improvement, it is a significant development for the company and its customers, especially in a time where ease of cleaning and sealed surfaces are critical.

A traditional work surface includes a substrate that has been laminated. Somehow the manufacturer adheres an edge to it. In the past, it has always been glued on, Glynn said. That always leads to that little line that goes around the circumference of the work surface, which is the very visible glue line.

"When you go into older installations and some newer ones, you can put your fingernails on or put a pen in, and pull that away from the work surface, the substrate," he said. "We have introduced a new technology into the factory that is new in the market, that is laser installed. Through a laser beam — we call it the Fuse edge — you actually meld the edgeband to the substrate. So it eliminates the glue line, and you cannot pull it away."

This has some real advantages in a post-COVID-19 workplace, just by happenstance. It's much easier to clean. It has an antimicrobial tendency to it because nothing can get into that glue line where that space used to be. So it is very, very cleanable.

"That's the one advantage, but primarily it was in terms of durability," Glynn said. "It was introduced because of durability and the aesthetics. It's a very clean look. You do not see the matching edgeband. Designers really take to it quite nicely."

The virus has not changed Groupe Lacasse. It is still the highly focused company dealers love to partner with and customers love to work with. Still, the way it is addressing the market is different, Garneau said. **BoF**