

The Future of Work

An Interview with Richard Mines, Principal, WB Wood

EDITORS' NOTE *Richard Mines started his career in furniture at William Doyle Galleries. In 1993, he entered the contract furniture industry at a Knoll Dealership, where he specialized in new business development. In 2004, fascinated by Herman Miller's Design Concepts and Heritage, Mines left the Knoll Dealership and teamed up with Bob Blau. Together, they bought WB Wood New York and, in 2007, they purchased Corporate Environments based in New Jersey.*



Richard Mines

This created one organization with branches in New York City and Basking Ridge, New Jersey. In 2009, Mines became sole owner of WB Wood and built up the organization to be one of the highest-grossing Herman Miller Certified Network Dealers in the country. In November 2020, WB Wood became a Haworth Preferred Dealer. Mines is a Board Member of WFUV, LMCC and FIAF.

COMPANY BRIEF *WB Wood (wbwood.com), founded in 1905, is recognized as a prominent furniture dealership and management company in the United States. In addition to being a Haworth Preferred Dealer, it represents 300 other manufacturers with products spanning the design and budget spectrum. WB Wood provides a full range of procurement, furniture and project management services to a variety of businesses and institutions in the New York metro area and across the United States, working alongside their architects, design firms and consultants.*

Will you highlight the history and heritage of WB Wood and discuss how the business has evolved?

WB Wood was founded in 1905 by William Barton Wood as an office supplies company which, in later years, morphed into office furnishings. WB Wood started to solidify its position as a major office furnishings supplier in the 1970s with offices in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut servicing the Tri-state area. In the mid-1990s, Herman Miller purchased WB Wood, buying-out the New York division of WB Wood, closing the Connecticut division, and the New Jersey division was taken private by one of the partners. New York WB Wood, which was the largest of the three offices by far, continued to be led and run by one of the partners who stayed on as an employee of Herman Miller. Fast forward several years later, Herman Miller realized that it did not make sense for them to be both the manufacturer and distributor. To be a viable distributor they also had to sell competing manufacturers, which was a bit of a conundrum, so Herman Miller, who had purchased about 15 commercial furniture dealers around the country, had a corporate mandate to divest of dealerships.

I teamed up with the person running WB Wood at the time and we purchased it back from Herman Miller in 2005. We made some tweaks to the company – strengthened efficiencies, implemented new technologies, super-charged growth of the sales force and acquired a couple of other dealerships around

the New York metropolitan area. I bought out my business partner nine years ago and continued to further maximize operational efficiencies, enhanced the company's brand equity, and have fostered WB Wood's long heritage and reputation of being a super-service organization. It is what WB Wood has been known for throughout its lengthy history. We have continued to grow the organization and expand the geographic footprint throughout the country, working with major companies. In late 2020, we decided that it made sense to change alignment of the main line manufacturer from Herman Miller to Haworth. Today, we have around 120 employees.

How has WB Wood adapted its business to address the challenges caused by the pandemic?

The premise of our business is people working in offices and hospitals. We are following CDC required guidelines while helping our customers create environments that implement the current return to in-person work policies. Based on our research, we are educating our clients on what the workplace post-pandemic will look like and have aligned ourselves with manufacturers that provide the appropriate products.

What are your views on the future of work and how is WB Wood positioned for growth with the changes taking place around workspaces?

We have experienced points in time where far fewer people were going to the office, making the shift toward working from home. After 9/11, looking back at that time, people were

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fleeing for the suburbs, and in 2008-2009 during the Great Recession, people were getting rid of their real estate. Though the current circumstances are clearly more extreme around a pandemic, I believe the future of work will be in an office environment. The largest and most successful companies – Facebook, Google, and Amazon among many others, are investing heavily in the office environment and the office of the future. They know that there is no substitution for face-to-face, human interaction. The office is where spontaneous ideas, conversations, and creative thinking take place, and that is how an organization’s culture is shaped and fostered.

I also believe that for many people, the workplace is their social outlet. People go to work to socialize and to meet other people. Many are very eager to have that escape each day and go to the office, meet with colleagues and chit chat at the water cooler and admire someone’s new suit or new shoes, or just talk about work and maybe what they did over the weekend. Those little rituals, though they may seem routine, are very important in a person’s workday. Additionally, for the younger generation, particularly those members moving to a new city, the office becomes a social outlet. Work colleagues can become part of a social network that extends beyond the office to include, perhaps, going out for drinks after work or joining a company softball team. Whatever the social outlet may be, in-person interaction is important and I think what most of us have been missing living through the current situation.

Will you discuss your new partnership with Haworth and how this partnership will help further elevate the WB Wood brand?

The office is not going away although there may be tweaks to how people sit, or the height of the panels, for instance. As I think about the future of WB Wood, its incumbent upon me, as a business owner, to help feed the mouths of all WB Wood employees, their families, and extended families. It is extremely important to me that we are aligned with a manufacturer that truly sees the future of work as their number one priority and concern. They are focused on continuing to develop and innovate their product mix, and to modify its product offerings around the office space of the future, near and longer-term. That is Haworth’s primary business. Their single most important focus is designing, developing, promoting and supporting their distribution dealer network to bring these products to the office environment. Haworth is a multi-billion-dollar, privately-held company, which allows them to be more flexible and agile versus publicly traded office furniture manufacturers.

How do you describe the WB Wood culture and how critical is culture to the success of the company?

Culture and reputation, I believe, are equally shared and critical priorities for WB Wood. Our organizational and cultural mantra is to enjoy the people you work with, have fun along the way and make a good living while you are at it. It is a professional

environment with the atmosphere of an extended family. That type of culture is critical for me, as a leader and business owner. We just have one ask of our employees – excel at what you are hired to do, exceed our client’s expectations, live up to our values and brand promise, and focus on delivering superior customer service.

How critical is it for WB Wood to build a diverse and inclusive workforce?

It’s very important for WB Wood to have a diverse and inclusive workforce. In fact, I believe it is that diversity that strengthens WB Wood. At our organization, the majority of our employees are female. We have a strategic alliance with a WNBE/NBE, which allows this start-up organization to pursue larger opportunities than it ordinarily would be able to by partnering with WB Wood, and utilizing some of WB Wood’s back offices. This synergistic relationship also allows corporations to satisfy their Supplier Diversity Requirements, while having the “bench strength” of a larger organization, if required. These are important initiatives within the WB Wood universe. We also host a women’s forum every year with women leaders from our organization. This 2- to 3-day retreat includes guest speakers and breakout sessions. It is a wonderful opportunity for the group to leave the office for a few days and spend time discussing various professional issues and topics while further bonding as a team. These types of events are embedded within the culture of our firm and are something that we prioritize. ●

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