

Brayton to launch new furniture line, employ up to 200

[The Business Journal - by Matt Evans, Staff writer](#)

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Nearly 40 years after he launched his first contract furniture manufacturing company, Paul Brayton is setting off on that same road again with plans to begin making custom furniture for the high-end hospitality and office markets.

The new division of the High Point textile firm [Paul Brayton Designs](#) has already hired about a dozen people, and Brayton expects to employ as many as 200 by the end of 2012, with about half coming this year.

All the furniture will be made in the Triad. Brayton is investing about \$2.5 million to purchase and renovate a 33,000-square-foot factory in Corporate Industrial Park in Archdale that was formerly occupied by Bobby Labonte Racing. Brayton expects the total investment in his new line of business to be around \$4 million.

“It sounds a little corny, I know, but I had a strong dream, envisioning myself running my old company and growing it quite rapidly like we did before,” Brayton said. “I’m expecting to have at least 100 (employees) by the end of this year and 200 by the end of next year.”

That old company was Brayton International, which he founded in 1973. It grew to hundreds of employees and multiple factories around High Point by the time it was bought out by Michigan-based contract furniture giant Steelcase in 1987. Paul Brayton remained as a senior executive with Steelcase until 1993, when he left to start Paul Brayton Designs.

That firm creates textiles and leathers for the hospitality, health care and office markets. Until now, it has stayed away from Brayton’s former furniture niche. But Brayton said the industry has consolidated to the point where there is room for a new player, and the gathering economic recovery will help too.

“The timing of the economy is a positive reason we decided to do it,” he said. “There’s an upward swing in office furniture, and I think we’ll have at least a five-year recovery period where we’re doing better each year.”

Industry cluster focus

Brayton's move is a boost for Triad economic developers, who have placed a special focus on broadening the region's connections to the furnishings business.

The High Point area is already recognized as the center of the residential furniture industry, home to the massive High Point Market wholesale trade show and with deep historical roots to manufacturing, design and distribution in that sector.

But expertise in home furnishings could also be applied to companies in niches such as contract furniture, said **Jim Melvin** of the Bryan Foundation, who co-chairs a committee for the Piedmont Triad Partnership focused on furnishings industry recruitment.

That committee has organized pitch meetings and recruiting missions that have reached beyond the residential market. Melvin expects those efforts to bear fruit.

"We're telling our story and getting some interest," including from the contract furniture industry, Melvin said. The partnership has hired a staffer to recruit new facilities from companies in the U.S. and abroad. "He's beating the bushes and finding some good things, so we're encouraged," Melvin said.

Brayton has reason to be encouraged at the prospects for his new business, said **Brian Bascom**, a partner with the Michigan consulting firm [Velocity Partners](#), who tracks the contract furniture industry.

One factor in Brayton's favor is his relatively small size, which will let him deal directly with architects and designers and focus on high-end custom jobs. Bascom said the contract sector has shrunk from around \$12 billion in the U.S. a few years ago to around \$8 billion now. Though a rebound is expected, the bigger manufacturers are still having trouble finding enough new office towers to furnish or other projects suited to their size.

Also, the fact that Brayton is self-financing his new venture will give him a big leg up in potential profitability.

"That's a big hurdle for smaller companies; the most successful ones that I see have limited their financial leverage," he said. "I can think of half a dozen manufacturers who are very successful on revenues of less than \$50 million because they've paid cash for everything and eliminated all that interest expense."

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