



level

**level**<sup>TM</sup> is the certification program for the BIFMA furniture sustainability standard. The **level** conformance mark ensures a comprehensive, independent, and impartial assessment of the environmental and social impacts of a product's manufacture. **level** makes it easy to identify products that have been evaluated against a consensus-based, multi-attribute sustainability standard.



level

the BIFMA sustainability standard

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## Why level?

The commercial furniture industry has long been a leader in the quest for responsible manufacturing processes, facilities and products. But we needed a common language, framework and approach to help us evaluate and improve the sustainability of our enterprises. We needed a standard that did justice to the complexity of assessing a multitude of environmental and social responsibility impacts across a variety of products. We needed an impartial process for auditing conformance to the standard. And we needed a simple tool that our industry, clients, and communities could use to understand our efforts to be sustainable. An array of “black box” methodologies—expensive, proprietary and available only to those with large marketing budgets—could not appropriately serve the breadth of the marketplace. We needed a fair and balanced field of play. We needed to be **level**.

## What is level?

**The Standard:** **level** includes a standard developed by the Joint Committee on Business and Institutional Furniture Sustainability. In 2006 the Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturers Association (BIFMA) and NSF International began drafting the standard with a broad and diverse group of stakeholders following the American National Standards Institute consensus process. The draft standard, known as BIFMA e3-2008, was released for consensus body vote and public comment in June 2008.

Modeled after the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED Rating System, the standard

provides measurable market-based definitions of progressively more sustainable furniture by establishing performance criteria that address environmental and social aspects throughout the supply chain.

The standard is applicable to all business and institutional furniture; this includes but is not limited to moveable walls, systems furniture, desking systems, casegoods, tables, seating and accessories. The standard is also applicable to materials and components manufactured by suppliers to furniture manufacturers, whether manufactured in one or more facilities, in one country or multiple countries. The standard defines measures of sustainability in four areas: Materials; Energy and Atmosphere; Human and Ecosystem Health; and Social Responsibility.

**The Certification Process:** In order to achieve a **level** certification, a manufacturer must contract with a recognized, independent, third-party certification body. That certification body then uses the BIFMA e3-2008 sustainability standard as a framework to conduct the audit function, measure all required information and finally certify the specific product with the **level** conformance mark. Manufacturers that evaluate their products against the BIFMA sustainability standard without the third party auditing process will not be able to use the **level** conformance mark and their products are not considered “**level** certified”

There are presently six different certification bodies recognized to certify products to the **level** standard. Consult the **level** website ([www.levelcertified.org](http://www.levelcertified.org)) for a current list of participating third-party certification bodies.

**Conformance: level** has three conformance thresholds within the standard. Products can be awarded a **level 1**, **level 2** or **level 3** certification mark based on the combined score achieved in their sustainability evaluation. **level 3** is the highest award a product can achieve. These thresholds are analogous to the silver, gold and platinum rankings within the LEED rating system, but they provide the flexibility to add new thresholds to the program in the future as the industry evolves to become even more environmentally and socially responsible.

In the **level** certification process, a product, the organization, and facilities that produced it are scored according to sustainability criteria in the four areas of Materials, Energy and Atmosphere, Human and Ecosystem Health, and Social Responsibility. In order to be **level** certified, products must meet certain minimum standards in each area, but they can earn additional credits in order to achieve a higher level of conformance. Meeting the **level** thresholds is a lot harder than it sounds. It requires months (if not years) of work by manufacturers to measure their manufacturing process inputs and outputs, incorporate new material formulations, create design protocols, and formalize corporate actions around social responsibility. The **level** conformance mark is an easily identifiable but hard-earned symbol of a company’s commitment to sustainability.

**Materials:** The standard deals with the issue of materials from a variety of perspectives. At a prerequisite level, all participating manufacturers must have a design for environment (DFE) program in place, followed by an assessment of a variety of component parts. The standard recognizes a variety of sustainability attributes

for materials, such as climate neutrality, recycled content, efficiency of material usage, biodegradability, selection of rapidly renewable materials, life cycle assessments, and more. A **level** certification provides a perspective on what it took to produce the final product.

**Energy and Atmosphere:** Corporate sustainability policies, manufacturing facilities, and finished products are accounted for within this section. Credits are available for demonstrating an EnergyStar building rating equivalent of 60 or higher. Measurements from “cradle to gate” and “gate to gate” for embodied energy, green house gases, lighting, and transportation impacts all provide a lens to reflect the sustainability impacts of materials as they move from their simple origins as raw materials into their ultimate finished state.

**Human and Ecosystem Health:** Credits in this section are earned by reduction or elimination of toxic components, hazardous waste, noxious air emissions and other pollutants from production processes and finished products. This standard is the only one of its kind with a publicly disclosed Chemicals of Concern list, including persistent, bio-accumulative and toxic chemicals, reproductive toxicants, carcinogens and endocrine disruptors.

**Social Responsibility:** Beyond health and safety, the **level** standard accounts for labor practices and human rights. Social responsibility, external health and safety management as well as inclusiveness afford optional credits within this section. As companies continue to incorporate greater social responsibility into their corporate actions, **level** certification will reflect those contributions.

## Why is level important?

In a world of information overload and a rising tide of environmental claims, **level** is important because it provides a single, fully transparent way of understanding and communicating what a sustainable furniture product is. The standard provides a common, but challenging set of criteria for furniture producers and their supply chain to evaluate the sustainable aspects of products. And **level** ensures that an independent third party has conducted the conformance assessment. If not, then the products cannot carry the **level** mark.

The contract furnishing industry, as well as individuals and companies both inside and outside the industry, recognize that the standard must change and grow with the industry. And **level** will. As better process methodologies, component materials and means of understanding the issue of social responsibility evolve, the standard will evolve as well.

By providing an open, consensus-based standard that allows for all stakeholders to have a transparent view of both product and manufacturer, everyone in our working universe can better understand sustainability.

We’re working towards achieving greater balance in how we operate. We’re working to continuously improve our products and how they can contribute to a healthy workplace. We’re working on being **level**.

