

How HR Can Green Up Your Company

Tim Sanders

Chances are you work at a company that has an initiative to “go green.” In researching my new book, I found that almost three out of four corporate executives cited at least one internal sustainability program at their companies—with strategic implications.

Leading CEOs such as Wal-Mart’s Lee Scott and GE’s Jeffrey Emelt have determined that going green is great for the brand, good for talent acquisition, and even green for the bottom line. When the economy comes back, and it likely will eventually, legislators will renew their quest to tax corporate carbon emissions. When such legislation passes, being green will be a deciding factor between profit and loss.

Around your company, different departments are weighing in on the initiative, doing what they can to lessen the company’s footprint on the environment. The product group is reducing product size and packaging, working on closed-loop manufacturing, and chopping waste out of the supply chain. The marketing group is working on this too. Even the IT group is chipping away at the company’s footprint. It’s time for HR to join this effort too and help the company climb Mount Sustainability. During my last days at Yahoo! I worked in the HR department as a leadership coach. I noticed that we could lead companywide efforts in branding, quality, or social responsibility. There’s no reason that HR couldn’t lead the green movement too!

There are three areas in which human resource professionals can contribute to their companies’ sustainability—operations, function, and influence—and these are described in the sections that follow, along with specific suggestions on how HR can help green up the company.

HR OPERATIONS

The idea in this section is to conduct HR operations with the lowest impact possible, yet retain all the quality of services that internal customers have come to expect. The best way to approach this is via the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA’s) lens on how information workers generate carbon emissions. According to recent agency data, in our day-to-day business lives, the top three contributors to our environmental impact include buildings, travel and transportation, and documents.

Buildings

The EPA estimates that buildings consume two-thirds of all electricity in the United States; they also create more than one-third of carbon dioxide emissions, a higher percentage than that of automobiles. A common notion in the construction and design industry is that green buildings start with energy efficiency. Stuart Brodsky, national program manager for Energy Star, a joint program of the Department of Energy and the EPA,

points out that "the energy consumed by a building over its life exponentially exceeds the energy and fossil fuels consumed for the building's materials and development."¹ So, to put it bluntly, put your department on a strict energy diet.

When you were young, your parents probably told you to turn off the lights. But now that you're an adult, do you turn off the lights at work when you leave for the day? According to a 2007 national survey conducted by Harris Interactive for Sun Microsystems, 92 percent of respondents said they turn off the lights when they leave a room at home, but only 52 percent said they do so at work. Dave Douglas, vice president of eco-responsibility at Sun Microsystems, says, "Businesses don't cut power consumption. People do. If you're an

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employee . . . you have an enormous opportunity to make a difference for our planet."²

So turn off all the lights when you leave for the day. And don't stop with the lights. Turn off computers, copiers, and printers in your cubicle and, if appropriate, your office. Each one of those devices, when left on standby or plugged into a power strip, drains up to 70 watts of continuous electricity. Recent research conducted by the EPA shows that you can cut your electrical consumption by 10 percent by powering off devices and turning off power strips.

Likewise, monitor and adjust your habits concerning heat and air conditioning. The energy used to heat or cool buildings is a big driver of a company's carbon footprint. Resist

the temptation to crank up the AC or heater at work. Bring a sweater during the winter, and wear light clothing during the summer. On a hot summer day, draw the blinds shut in the morning to keep the heat out. On a cold but sunny winter day, open them and let the sun heat the room.

Travel and Transportation

Research by the Center for Environmental Leadership in Business has determined that employee travel constitutes a major part of a company's carbon footprint. So slash it. The next time you're taking a meeting out of the office, ask yourself—do you really need to go? Yes, you can easily jump in a car or grab a cheap regional flight and get some face time. But have you exhausted the alternatives? An inexpensive videoconference can mimic the benefits of a personal meeting, as can, in some instances, a simple conference call. When you absolutely have to travel, try to reduce long-haul air travel. In 2005, researchers at the environmental consultant AEA Technology found that one long-haul airplane trip will create significantly more carbon emissions than your car does in an entire year. In your daily commute, use mass transit whenever possible. Many companies offer vouchers to support mass transit. Investigate carpooling as well.

Telecommuting is another way to cut employee travel to and from the workplace. If, for example, you allowed your employees to work one day a week from home, you'd cut employee commutes by 20 percent as well as reduce power and water use at work! For many of your employees, this wouldn't risk a cut in productivity. In fact, it may be a source of job satisfaction and monetary savings for them.

Many of your other business habits create transportation-related carbon emissions. For example, some workers suffer from overnight-shipping syndrome, using next-day air delivery for every package. Airfreight is the most carbon-intensive form of shipping; air shipping's footprint is much bigger than that of ground or marine shipping. Aveda Corporation's own internal study revealed that shipping by air emitted 73 times more carbon dioxide than shipping by sea, so the company now uses sea rather than airfreight whenever possible.

Documents

For HR professionals (as well as those in legal, finance, and sales), paper usage may be the number-one way we plunder the planet! Although the Information Age promised us a paperless office, the reality is that we print more pages every day than ever before. In their booklet *Paper Cuts: Recovering the Paper Landscape* (Worldwatch Institute, 1999), environmental researchers Janet Abramovitz and Ashley Mattoon document that the number of pages printed in U.S. offices increases by 20 percent annually, due to the explosion of information and printer accessibility. As of 2008, the average U.S. worker prints one piece of paper every ten minutes.

Each stage of the printing-paper supply chain attacks the environment. Harvesting timber for paper pulp threatens forests and species. Processing pulp to paper generates wastewater and consumes massive amounts of petroleum. Transporting paper, a heavy item in bulk, consumes gasoline and contributes to air pollution. Even the ink used for printing carries its own environmental price tag, as it requires oil and produces gases and toxins if not properly disposed. If

the United States cut annual paper use by 20 percent, it would prevent the emission of more than 3 million tons of greenhouse gases—the equivalent of taking half a million cars off the road for a year.

So roll up your sleeves and redesign how you consume and distribute information. Personally, I've reduced my paper footprint by more than 50 percent over the last year, despite the fact that I've been researching and writing a book. The following suggestions can help you do the same—or better.

- ❑ *Use recycled paper.* Partially or fully recycled paper has far less impact than virgin timber paper. A 2002 study by the Alliance for Environmental Innovation

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determined that using recycled paper stock will enable you to eliminate wood use and reduce net greenhouse-gas emissions by 50 percent and wastewater by 33 percent. Some of you may not like the quality of 100 percent recycled paper. If so, bridge that gap with 30 percent recycled paper stock, which retains the brightness and thickness of virgin paper but still puts a dent in your paper footprint. The research mentioned above determined that for every 40 cases of 30 percent recycled paper stock you substitute for virgin stock, you save more than seven trees and preserve more than 2,000 gallons of water from being used in the production process.

- ❑ *Think before you print.* Over the course of the last few decades, we've gotten into a habit: we print, then think. Instead, we should think first and only then print—maybe. Let's say you receive a PDF document, print it, and then realize it's a 50-page tome that you really didn't want to read, or you get a bloated PowerPoint presentation or ten-page e-mail. What do you do? Print to read it later, and then discover it's a hundred pages long, or nothing you needed to see, or perhaps that it wasn't even meant for you in the first place. Try a new professional practice: Justify every print job before you click the print button. Put up a sign on your printer that reads "Think Before You Print."

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- ❑ *When you decide to print, try to reduce the page count.* Scrutinize the number of pages in the document, and think about how many you need. For example, when printing an e-mail conversation, you may find it runs 20 pages, when all you need is the last few exchanges. The same goes for an online map. Frequently, you'll find it prints on a single page but is followed by a second, third, or even fourth, all littered with advertisements. Reformat documents to eliminate wasted pages, or read them on-screen and skip the print job altogether.
- ❑ *Post signs to remind coworkers to also think before printing.* A sales coordinator at a Pasadena mortgage company took this idea a step further. To see how effective these signs could be, not just on his own

behavior but on that of his entire floor, he conducted an experiment in which he counted how many reams of paper his floor used in one week. The following week he posted Think Before You Print signs in bold letters on all the floor's common printers. Underneath, he included his e-mail address for any questions. The next week, he counted the reams used—printing was down 20 percent. Then he posted a larger sign, and the total reduction zoomed to almost 40 percent.

- ❑ *Print on both sides of the page.* Another simple way to reduce your paper footprint is to set printing to duplex mode, or printing on both sides of the page. In 2006, office workers for the City of Seattle reduced their paper printing by more than 21 percent using duplex-mode copying and printing.

If duplex-mode printing isn't possible because you use a small printer, you can cut your paper use manually by using two-sided printing. Take used, unneeded paper, turn it over, and print on the other side. In many instances, whatever is printed is primarily for your eyes only, and reusing such paper will reduce the amount of fresh paper you need.

FUNCTION

Here's where you go beyond having less of a negative impact and focus on building a corporate culture that cares about the environment and puts sustainability front and center.

Hire Eco-Friendly People

If you want your company to go green, first search for green-friendly employees, as Timberland does when selecting business

managers. Timberland's recruiting manager, Liam Connelly, says that when interviewing MBA graduates, he looks beyond their finance or marketing skills for people who "have a passion to make the world a better place."

During job interviews at companies such as Green Mountain Coffee Roasters and Patagonia, candidates are queried about their environmental interests and passions during job interviews. Similarly, a 2007 *Wall Street Journal*/Harris Interactive survey found that eight out of ten corporate recruiters search out business managers who have knowledge of, and interest in, sustainability. Include sustainability in your hiring process too. When advertising jobs, mention that you're looking for eco-friendly applicants. Add sections on your employment form in which candidates must write an essay about their concern for the environment or list eco-friendly activities in which they participate. Emphasize green values in the hiring criteria, along with education, experience, and attitude.

Promote Eco-Friendly Employee Habits

One of the first components in Wal-Mart's companywide sustainability initiative was employee education. To implement this mandate, the company hired Adam Werbach, former president of the Sierra Club and current CEO of Act Now, a sustainability training company.

Each year, Werbach trains thousands of Wal-Mart managers and employees on the fundamentals of sustainability, helping them to create their own PSPs (personal sustainability projects), a process that heightens their sensitivity to the environment. The PSPs reinforce the company initiative, increase employee engagement, and spur

innovative thinking at the store level. Make eco-studies part of your new-hire orientation process. Bring in an expert to conduct a workshop. Offer to reimburse employees who take environmental studies classes at a local college or through a training company.

You can also promote green thinking at work through compensation programs. Timberland and Google award employees up to \$5,000 for buying a hybrid car. Wal-Mart includes energy-efficiency and sustainability metrics in managers' annual evaluations and bonus plans.

Influence

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What kind of influence can you or your group have? Consider the case of one legal professional who went way beyond her role to influence one of the biggest companies in the world.

Joan Krajewski, an exemplary network creator, has always been on a mission to help preserve the planet for future generations. How she might actually do so occurred to her while she was in law school and working part-time at the National Resources Defense Council. She decided that her best shot at making a difference would come from helping companies measure and improve their environmental performance.

The arena so interested Krajewski that she eventually left her law practice for a position at American Airlines in the mid-1990s, where she helped implement an environmental management system (EMS) that measured the company's impact on the planet. In 2005, Krajewski was approached by Microsoft, which did not have an EMS in place, to become the director of environmental policy of its hardware business unit. Shortly after arriving, Krajewski realized that Microsoft's silo organization would make the installation of a companywide EMS difficult, so she decided her best bet was to create a cross-company network of eco-minded employees.

Her first action was to recruit participants throughout the computer hardware business unit. Then, a few months later, she fanned out, meeting with other business units such as the software applications group that made Microsoft's Office and Enterprise product lines.

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Krajewski next hosted meetings throughout the company to teach others about Microsoft's environmentally related legal risks, allowing her a chance to connect with kindred spirits she might otherwise have never met. Krajewski used these meetings to identify those who had a real passion for environmental sustainability, so she started out by asking, "What's the biggest environmental problem at Microsoft?" Krajewski followed up with each person who spoke, creating a network database of names.

She then staged cross-company educational events to discuss sustainability and

environmental impact, making sure to introduce speakers to each other. For example, she would introduce Paul from the software group to Pam from the MSN Internet group, saying, "You two should get together because Paul has information that you need, Pam; and Pam, you have technology that can help Paul meet his goals in product sustainability."

Once Krajewski had connected people, she focused them on creating results by establishing urgency around environmental issues. She presented data that showed why Microsoft had to be ready for upcoming regulations and carbon-emissions taxes, because otherwise the company could face dramatic financial setbacks. From a branding standpoint, she illustrated how Microsoft would have to be the greenest company in the technology business to maintain its position as an industry leader. She also coordinated the people in her network by issuing ambitious goals to each group, such as establishing a companywide environmental management system and reducing the packaging size across product lines by more than 50 percent.

In two years, using this find-connect-focus strategy, Krajewski had built a network of 40 saver soldiers representing all business units at Microsoft that was able to create an EMS and implement it companywide. With the data-center group, Krajewski also built a software tool that measures carbon emissions on a daily basis; initially for internal use, it's now available for purchase by any company.

Network members also created widely distributed white papers on the business benefits of reducing or eliminating packaging. Inside the hardware group, product designers reduced packaging of products such as the Xbox gaming console by as much as 40 percent; in the software group, network members also innovated how products were packaged,

reducing waste and carbon emissions dramatically.

In the end, Krajewski turned what could have been an obstacle—the company's size—into a resource. She used the depth of the employee pool to find coworkers who cared about the environment to create an effective network. You can too. If not you, then who?

Here's the best news: almost all of my sustainability ideas save your company money

too! This is a recession-friendly green strategy for modern business that may rid the workplace of some sacred cows of convenience and establish the best practices that mark a green, efficient, and competitive organization.

NOTES

1. <http://tinyurl.com/6qp0t5>.
2. <http://tinyurl.com/5nq3m4>.

***Tim Sanders**, former Yahoo! executive, joined the company in 1999 and served as chief solutions officer and leadership coach. He is the author of *Love Is the Killer App* (Crown, 2002) and *The Likeability Factor* (Crown, 2005) and is a public speaker on topics related to making a difference in the workplace and building relationships. Sanders's third book is *Saving the World at Work* (Doubleday Business, 2008), from which this article has been adapted and excerpted. To contact the author or for more information, visit www.SavingTheWorld.net.*