

Bringing a sustainable mindset to the office



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The Australian government's waste management hierarchy sets a solid foundation to establish sustainable practice in the workplace, writes KAREN SKILLINGS.

In the same way that households are installing mini power stations on their roofs to reduce strain on the electric grid, many organisations today are looking to lead on the sustainability fundamentals in the workplace by introducing responsible sourcing, community and social impact initiatives.

These initiatives couldn't come at a more pressing time. The average Australian produces 1.5 tonnes of waste in a year, but how many can say they are doing their part to reduce the impact that this waste causes on not just their environment, but the world? Change needs to happen, and what better place for it to start than in the workplace.

THE WASTE MANAGEMENT HIERARCHY

The Environment and Communications References Committee produced a report in 2018 entitled *Never waste a crisis – the waste and recycling industry in Australia*. It was while reading this report that I first happened upon the committee's waste hierarchy pedagogy, which demonstrates the key framework underpinning waste management policy and practice in Australia. The hierarchy ranks the ways of dealing with waste in order of preference, so the rest of this article will look at waste management actions in the same order and reflect on where each of us can make a difference in the workplace.

1. AVOIDING AND REDUCING WASTE

The most preferable action in the waste life cycle is to avoid and reduce waste, which is probably one of the easiest things for staff to relate to. There has to be a significant shift in the way employees think about everything from printing to plastic disposal in order to make a real difference. Workplaces can do their part through the implementation of initiatives such as providing reusable dishes and cutlery in the kitchen.

2. REUSING WASTE

The next preferable action is the reuse of waste, which covers common initiatives such as reusing scrap paper for taking notes. Here's the thing though: you would have to reuse a truckload of paper to really feel like you have done something good here. Then there's the question about where to store all the paper! A better example of reuse initiatives could be at the time when the organisation has a business change such as planning a move to another premises. This is where the reuse of furniture, equipment, utility and kitchen items can be critical.

Work with your designer and project team to discover where your organisation can reuse many of the high end or good condition items you already have. This is a great way to promote sustainability in your workplace. Take the opportunity to promote how your organisation is working to reduce environmental impacts to your staff.

3. RECYCLING OF WASTE

Although recycling of waste is important and we talk and practice recycling each and every day, we should be doing more to avoid creating the waste that we need to recycle.

Most workplaces generate a considerable volume of paper waste as well as mass amounts of used and redundant stationery items and expended print cartridges. Find out how other organisations are recycling! Jump on the Planet Ark website and discover ways in which your company and staff can reduce their impact and improve their footprint on the planet.

4. RECOVERY OF ENERGY

When it comes to thinking about how your workplace can recover energy, things start to get a little harder. So let's start with something simple, such as using the off switch more often. Lots of office equipment is drawing power even when your staff are not using it. You have a habit of hitting the off switch at home, so why not at work? On a broader level, energy recovery refers to the conversion of heat and electricity waste. It's a complex consideration and one that requires significant systems in place before employees factor into the equation.

The war on workplace waste can be fought hard in the early phases of the waste management hierarchy.



5. DISPOSAL OF WASTE

This is the least preferable practice of waste management as the problem already exists. The most common types of waste in the workplace fall under generic waste management and includes paper products, office equipment, miscellaneous waste such as food waste and wrappers. It is what we are trying to avoid.

NOW WHAT?

Now that we understand what our preferences are, how can we go about creating change?

The first step is to learn what your staff consider the most significant positive and negative environmental and social risks.

The war on workplace waste can be fought hard in the early phases of the waste management hierarchy. Here lies the opportunity to consult with staff on how they can contribute to a more sustainable, lower carbon footprint through improvements in sourcing, procurement and logistics, or in the production and sale of the organisation's products and services.

Staff can contribute to your organisation's work waste policy and / or sustainable

chain management frameworks to drive engagement and help them understand how they can support sustainability and waste management programs for the benefit of the world, not just their households or places of work.

For organisations undergoing a workplace change, don't miss the tremendous opportunity to test how your company identifies, assesses and manages sustainable practices and what metrics and targets can be developed to better manage environmental impact.

To make a start on work waste or sustainable chain management, look for inspiration in the efforts the large banks are undertaking. Many have developed paper transformation programs that support targets for their businesses to achieve 50 percent to 90 percent reduction in group paper use, with other initiatives being in the area of community and social impact. Some initiatives include allowing more time for staff to take place in workspace volunteering programs or introducing volunteering leave or skilled volunteering programs.

The next step is to consider what's right for the planet rather than what's right for now.

Change programs and organisational environmental management strategies such as a work waste policy or sustainable chain management framework can do a great deal of good when it comes to meeting obligations in sustainability and waste management.

Ask your staff what they think is right for the planet as opposed to what they think is right for now, and don't forget you need to look at the big and the small impacts alike. Everything counts! Paper consumption, improved information management practices and sustainability monitoring of providers can often be a great start.

Use the waste management hierarchy as a tool to brainstorm improvements in the workplace that promote responsibility for sustainability and waste management practices – and correct any thinking that they are the responsibility of the FM team alone. ●

