

HARVESTING THE URBAN FOREST

BY KAREN NOZIK

What started a few years ago as the desire to save the planet is now the biggest challenge facing building managers: paper, the lifeblood of most offices, must be collected for recycling. More than just a grassroots movement started by a concerned group of "green" employees, office paper recycling programs are now the corporate mandate, a company's public pronouncement to make good on its environmental promises, and in many cases, the law.

Whether managers choose to see recycling programs as an economic opportunity or a royal pain the neck, salvaging office paper is a practice that is here to stay — one that must receive the same kind of thoughtful attention that other company projects receive, such as upgrading the computer network, or installing a more efficient voice mail system.

Rethinking waste paper as a valuable resource rather than as garbage is the first step, but does no good unless every person along the paper chain becomes enlightened. This means that everyone, from office managers to the cleaning crew, must become indoctrinated with the merits of the new system.

Convincing people that recycling is actually easier than just dumping is a challenge, but it can be done and, in fact, has been done in office buildings from coast to coast. The National Office Paper Recycling Project has issued a Challenge to Fortune 500 companies and other large public and private organizations to collectively triple office paper recycling by 1995. Thus far, close to 200 organizations have agreed to the three-step commitment: collecting office paper, purchasing paper that contains recycled fiber, and a third optional initiative such as

educating employees or sponsoring a community awareness program. The Project knows firsthand that many companies are having great success recycling their office paper. Some companies, such as Beneficial Management Corporation, are actually making money on their recycling programs. Last month, Beneficial pulled in \$1,800 collecting waste paper at its Peapack, New Jersey headquarters, a facility with over 1,200 employees.

"Beneficial has always had a recycling program in place," explains Jean Filiaci, Beneficial's Recycling Coordinator, "but as each employee has become more educated about the program, it's become vastly more successful." Jean attributes high employee participation to a series of workshops and educational recycling brochures prepared by Beneficial and the company's paper hauler.

A successful office paper recycling program must involve the hauler from the beginning, who may or may not be the same as the regular trash hauler. The "reverse" distribution network of recycling is still in its infancy stages in many locations, so some building managers are able to sell their paper while others report that they must pay for the service. In either case, it is critical for the person in charge of the paper recycling program to understand what conditions are acceptable in order for the hauler to take the paper to market. For instance, will the hauler accept mixed office paper, high grade white only, or green bar computer paper separately? These questions must be decided prior to implementing an efficient system of collection throughout the building so that the maintenance staff can understand which paper has value and in what condition it must be delivered.

Additionally, unless the paper which is purchased and distributed throughout the building is paper that the hauler is willing to take away, you might as well hang your program up. (Why buy meat if your guests are vegetarian?) Suddenly the person in charge of the office recycling program has as much interest in company purchasing policies as the purchasing agent. It is a terrific idea to have these two people coordinate their efforts. Only then can a "closed loop" system flourish, which is, after all, the point of a truly successful recycling program. Closing the loop means collecting waste paper plus purchasing products that boast recycled content — tissue and towel products are included, as well as packing materials such as corrugated boxes. It does no good to create a supply of waste paper without also creating a demand for products made from it. While building managers may not always have a say in what photocopier papers to buy for each office, they can certainly make positive contributions in areas over which they preside.

Hammering out the details of desk-side collection is the next step. First, examine the current method of trash collection. It may seem that collecting waste paper in addition to collecting trash requires twice as much effort for the janitorial crew. This appears to translate into extra time and money and immediately dampens any decisions to go through with a recycling program. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it becomes obvious that the greatest component of the office waste stream is paper. According to the National Office Paper Recycling Project, paper typically comprises 70% of what is currently being tossed away at work. "It makes sense then," suggests Richard Keller, Recycling Project Manager for

the Northeast Maryland Waste Disposal Authority, "to transfer most of the effort spent on dumping 'wet trash' (food wrappers and tissues), to the collection of paper instead." In other words, turn most regular waste baskets into paper-only baskets, and centralize the "wet trash" receptacles where each individual is responsible for depositing his/her trash at the end of the day. This highly efficient setup, though not the only means of collection, actually requires less janitorial service than regular trash collection because paper can sit in each office for weeks if necessary without spoiling or smelling foul. Again, since paper comprises most of the current office waste stream, eliminating paper leaves little to nothing left in the can for janitors to haul down to the dumpster. For building managers, this translates into real savings: the number of waste hauls per building can be reduced, and if trash is paid by the ton, the savings are instantaneous.

Successful recycling programs are taking hold across America due to increased interest and an emphasis on wasting less. But unless property owners and their tenants legitimize the task as a means of saving everyone money, employees will likely remain in the dark about effective recycling practices and the need for participation. Each person along the paper chain must be made aware of his/her role in promoting the building's program. Recycling coordinators must be viewed with the same importance as purchasing agents, and they must work together to close the loop by purchasing recycled and recyclable paper. Since demand for workplace recycling is on the upswing, property owners can further benefit by luring tenants with the offer of efficient collection and procurement programs.

Finally, fresh perspective and creativity in designing a collection system that makes it easy to recycle is key. Just because we have always hauled and dumped paper along with our other

trash is a poor reason to continue doing so. Paper, and office paper in particular, has monetary value. "Harvesting the urban forest" has now become a significant part of the office manager's job. As long as paper continues to flow between cubicles, his or her responsibilities will continue to grow. **S**

Karen Nozik is Outreach Coordinator of the National Office Paper Recycling Project, Washington, D.C. (For more information on setting up a successful office paper recycling program or to register with the National Recycling Challenge, contact BOMA International or the National Office Paper Recycling Project at (202)223-3088. Organizations that register for the Challenge receive a certificate of recognition for their commitment to office paper recycling, and are included in updates to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on the status of office paper recycling in America.)

Five Common Misconceptions About Recycling

by Richard Fuller

Recycling is fast becoming an accepted part of everyday life, not only in the home but in the office. Businesses today are being asked to separate and recycle a growing portion of their trash. The end result? Lower building operation costs and a cleaner environment.

Yet many people still have misconceptions about recycling — that it's expensive, inefficient, or just a major hassle. The following addresses some of the concerns.

1. We recycle because we are running out of landfills.

Not true. While some individual states are facing shortages of landfill space, on the whole, we have increased the number and size of available landfills across the U.S. Landfills are larger, more numerous and better managed than ever before.

What has happened, however, is that dumping trash in these landfills has become more expensive. Federal environmental regulations, spiraling land costs, NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard), and local government controls have increased dumping fees from an average of \$20 per ton in the mid 1980s to over \$100 per ton today. And it is this rising cost that provides the incentive for recycling. As landfill costs have risen, recycling has become cheaper than landfilling. Cities and counties have realized this, and are promoting recycling first.

The real environmental reason to recycle is the savings in natural resources. A product made from raw materials almost always consumes more energy, wastes renewable natural resources and creates more pollutants than one made from recycled materials. An example: the energy saved by making an aluminum can from recycled aluminum rather than raw materials is equivalent to the energy from the amount of gasoline that would fill the same can. So every time you recycle a can, you save oil, not landfills.

2. Recycled products have a lower quality than products made from raw materials.

Afraid not. This myth is a by-product of the early attempts to recycle office paper in the 1960s. The technologies at that time simply were not up to it — the paper was often blotchy and dusty.

Nowadays, you can't tell a recycled paper product from a virgin paper product. Technologies have developed to make pulp from recycled content material that matches the technical specifications of virgin pulp. The quality of recycled papers is so high that manufacturers sometimes add specs and imperfections to the paper so that people will feel that it is really recycled!

Some products have been made with recycled materials for a long time, and we're not even aware that the item is recycled. Much of our aluminum fits into this category. A major share of tissue paper is also made of recycled material. Paperboard (cereal packages and shirt boxes) and glass also are often recycled, without a big song and dance. In fact, in the past, manufacturers have been loathe to say that their products were made from waste. Of course, now that we are in the environmental 90s, all this is changing!

3. Plastic is the problem.

Incorrect. We can't blame our country's solid waste disposal problems on the plastic bag stuck in the tree across the street. Plastics comprise less than two percent of the municipal solid waste stream, less than glass, metal, paper and compostable material.

Yard waste is the largest component of trash, comprising over 40% of the stream. If we really want to make a dent in the amount we landfill (and our disposal cost), this is the place to do it. Composting could cut the amount of waste in half, according to a panel of experts at a recent National Recycling Coalition symposium. This would mean composting not only leaves, grass clippings, vegetable peelings and other organic matter, but much of the paper in our waste stream as well.

4. Recycling is not working. There simply are not enough markets for the stuff.

Wrong again. Recycling is one of the boom industries of the century. And the amount of material being recycled grows year by year. Last year, according to each industry's figures, we recycled 52% of glass containers and 21% of plastic bottles.

More impressive, the American Paper Institute's target of 40% recycling of all waste paper by 1995 looks like it will be met this year. In 1992, the rate achieved was 38.5%, up from just over 30% in the previous year.

Some materials are having a problem, and are getting bad press. Plastics recycling is difficult because of the many types of materials involved — not all have developed the technologies markets to grow enough to make use of the volume. But on the whole, recycling is a success.

5. Recycling costs money — it is expensive, not a financial benefit.

Not so. For most commercial properties, recycling is a financial boom. Office buildings, department stores and hotels that have set up recycling programs in cities up and down the East Coast have reduced waste disposal costs by up to 40% from recycling. For a large office building in Manhattan, this could mean hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings each year. And, for the most part, recycling programs can be set up without any additional labor or material expenses so the benefit hits the bottom line directly.

Recycling saves building's money. For the commercial sector, recycling is often a financial blessing. **S**

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