



*"...the fact is 40 percent of the United States' energy consumption comes from commercial buildings, not automobiles."*

-Steve Grund, Chief Marketing Officer - Aardex

# Follow Our LEED

- ▶ The benefits of eco-consciousness and sustainability fall somewhere in between saving the planet to the warm fuzzy feeling you get when you sing 'Kumbaya, my Lord' after campfire-baked S'mores or do something slightly thoughtful like pledge \$1 per mile to a fundraiser. Whether you can afford a new, multi-million-dollar LEED Platinum building as headquarters for your enterprise or barely keep an air-quality-improving desk plant for your own office, there's a way to improve the color and quality of your life every day. You may not be driving a cutting-edge electric car or working in a solar-powered office, but there's always the week after next, and it's never too late to start. Cultural observer ROBERT DE LUCA outlines the movement to green America's businesses

Time was that recycling soda cans was considered too complex to wiggle into workplace policy. Then Greenland melted. Suddenly paper drives weren't enough anymore. The Earth-conscious explosion that kick-started in the home rolled downhill, as everything does, from the top (really close to the North Pole) measurably reducing the formerly frozen country.

It could be this is the only green thing happening in this pre-presidential election season as gas prices swell to record highs and business owners weigh what to cut from the budget next. Worrying about green issues gives us some comfort then as we practice a little projection, pretending to control the environment while simultaneously abandoning all fiduciary controls to fate. Even if we can't make money in this economy, we can pledge to save the Planet Earth, starting from the foundation up, designing commercial office buildings to meet and exceed environmental standards. If you need evidence, look no further than the White House's next prospective tenants, as both Republican and Democratic parties parry on the issue, billing their respective national conventions as the "greenest ever" using everything from low-VOC (Volatile Organic Compound) paints and carpeting to biodegradable celebratory balloons and recycled confetti. We can rationalize and proselytize all we want about Mother Earth, but environmental impact cannot be measured so much in American dollars or Euros. Instead, the goal is to preserve nonrenewable fossil fuels and conserve our fast-depleting water tables. Plus save Greenland. As the price of oil creeps up to our necks like a hostile serpentine vine and energy prices follow suit, the one true thing we can argue is that going green will soon be as much a measure of a company's success as its financial counterpart.

Today, when a company is seeking a green space, the language of negotiation sounds more like a science lecture than traditional business models. Tenant finish involves new materials and construction methods, making old notions of effective space sweat as builders parry with terms such as "carbon footprint," "baseline emissions levels," "sustainability," "water reclamation" and "indoor air quality." Buildings, homes and workspaces are measured against the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Rating System (LEED), more precisely defined by the structure's environmental impact on a scale that runs from simple certification at the lowest level to the premier Platinum rating. For an existing building to meet these requirements, the facility must score at least 32 points in six regulated environmental criteria after renovation; new construction must score 26 or higher. The higher a building's raw score, the better the LEED rating, and the lower its impact on the environment.

While eco-conscious building designs have been around since the '70s and the LEED yardstick was developed 10 years ago in 1998 under the Clinton administration, LEED recently found itself in the spotlight thanks to concerned scientists and the Hollywoodization of the global warming crisis in such films as *An Inconvenient Truth*. Companies large and small across the country are seeking LEED-certified designers to plan their new workspaces or to act as consultants when renovating existing facilities—both as a PR move and a way to reduce energy costs. Skeptics denounce these efforts as Potemkin-esque masquerading tactics on the part of big business and the general public. It's true that part of LEED's newfound popularity comes from the positive publicity a company receives when it moves into a certified space, increasing public approval and aiding in Earth-friendly advertising efforts. But despite any capitalistic motivations, the intrinsic benefits of operating in a green building far outweigh any image-enhancing market value. How so? Start with some common misconceptions about energy use and built-green principles in general. "The news today is all about the gas crisis, because that's visible and tangible in people's daily lives," says Steve Grund of the award-winning, Denver-based commercial development firm Aardex. "But the fact is 40 percent of the United States' energy consumption comes from commercial buildings, not automobiles. If every company started building smarter today, we could all be working in buildings that have 30 to 40 percent energy savings compared to the one you're likely working in now."

As in any business strategy, cost gets in the way. Gold- and Platinum-level LEED-certified buildings use the latest in low-impact, environmentally-aware materials, construction practices plus design and technology, none of which come particularly cheap. "Well," Grund intones, "the most astonishing thing I tell people is that if you can find the best way to bring in the most fresh air and the most natural light into a new building, you're already well on your way to securing LEED certification. While progressive design comes at a premium, we also use locally-sourced materials, and the open design plans that are essential to conserving light and air quality and reduce interior building costs. Not only that, but those improvements in air quality and light transmission create a better work environment and a healthier workspace, and that means less absenteeism, higher employee retention and improved productivity."

So while the perception exists of eco-sensitive buildings as tree-hugger altruism, expensive, or corporate-funded ploys designed to improve public perception, the truth is that a green workspace does just as much for its inhabitants as it does for the planet or the company behind its implementation. Going green is not as expensive as one might guess, especially when taking significant energy savings and increased productivity levels into consideration. Grund insists that in fewer than two years, the data will be present to convince even the staunchest of old-school corporations to investigate green alternatives.

If LEED-certified facilities are not just publicity tools or selfless planet-minded investments, and they simultaneously directly improve the health and livelihood of the inhabitants, why aren't more businesses constructing to LEED standards? When the focus shifts to renovation, the complication increases proportionately. Remediating old, outdated (and sometimes even toxic) infrastructure and redesigning within existing building dimensions causes a sharp upslope in expenditure.

While the rewards are still great, most small companies can't justify the high entry cost. And small businesses are left wondering if they're just plumb out of luck to which Jennifer Altman, a LEED-accredited professional designer with New York-based Ellen Honigstock Architect, PC, is absolute when she says, "Certainly not."

"Often, the same ends achieved by massive corporate funding are achieved simply by reanalyzing current energy practices, waste disposal and living and working habits." Honigstock tells of a client who had read about green roofing and wanted the same for his company headquarters, not realizing how expensive it was.

Disappointed in his inability to finance a \$500,000 investment into a sod roof, Honigstock says her firm “was able to show him a list of easier, far less costly methods by which he could lessen his building’s impact on the environment. He left very happy.” LEED has a nearly omnipotent hold over green building in the United States. And LEED certification is a desirable badge for any company to wear. But it’s not necessarily the only route to minimizing environmental impact, if that’s your corporate goal. Consumer product advertising would have you believe that environmental friendliness must be purchased in the form of newer, more efficient hybrid cars, organic produce and recycled rubber footwear. Yet most of that message is clever marketing targeted at emptying your wallet. Whether you own your own business or dream of owning one from your cubicle, you can expand your own green aura in simple, low-cost but highly-effective ways.

- \* Start with recycling. It sounds obvious, but recycling is one of the easiest and most dramatic ways to reduce your carbon footprint. If the last time you recycled was sometime during the Clinton administration, you’ll be surprised to find facilities now recycle everything from the old standard white paper, aluminum cans, cardboard, packing materials, every iteration of plastic and even most electronics. If your office doesn’t currently recycle, start a program and watch your coworkers show their never-before-seen green sides.
- \* Go Fluoro. Replace burned-out bulbs in your office with fluorescent fixtures or super-long-life CFLs. The days of harsh, artificial fluorescent light are over, as soft white and even pure daylight options have become readily available. Some decry the use of CFL (Compact Fluorescent) bulbs due to the mercury released when they break. When compared to incandescent bulbs, the reduction in waste and manufacturing over 10 years is a persuasive argument. The energy savings alone will recoup the extra cost in under a year.
- \* Conserve. Programmable thermostats, hot-water tank blankets and reflective roof paint conserve electricity without breaking the bank. Motion-detecting light switches are ideal for common areas like bathrooms and kitchens that are used periodically over a 24-hour period. Personal solar accessories like JuiceBags let you charge up electronics without ever touching a wall socket.
- \* Deploy sustainable practices. From planting shade trees outside to using renewable bamboo flooring to opting for reconditioned office furniture and recycled office supplies versus new, the choices you make day in and day out add up. Sustainability is the first thing you should consider when making a purchase or change to your business. Encourage carpooling, vanpooling and public transportation. Reward the folks who ride their bikes to work (with free coffee, for instance). Whether you conserve natural resources by going completely paperless, or you use products like bamboo that regrows in months, not years, greener or totally green alternatives to nearly every standard business practice exist. All you have to do is seek them out.
- \* Research. Many thousands of green practices and innovative green products exist—the point is to discover them and then implement a new course of action. Validate your effort with an energy audit to track reduction in your carbon footprint (go to [www.eere.energy.gov/consumer](http://www.eere.energy.gov/consumer) for details). Then, blog green. Share your findings with others, attend green conventions and join local green activity clubs in your community. Let others inspire you, and in turn, use the abundance of knowledge you’ll learn to generate enthusiasm, supporting green practices among others.
- \* Broadcast your efforts. Make your Earth-friendly practices known both in and beyond the workplace and use every opportunity to increase your green profile. Whether it’s a reminder in your email signature to think before printing or a plaque in your reception area requesting that visitors remove their shoes to avoid tracking in harmful contaminants, the only way to spread the green word is by amplifying it.

Once you go green, the likelihood is you’ll be hooked for life. The benefits you’ll realize—from savings on energy bills to improved health—are exponentially valuable. And you may be partly responsible for saving Greenland. •

By Robert De Luca