

Opportunity for positive environmental change

Contributed by Dr Marion Croy, Director, Enviromentor Ltd (a consultant for Envirowise), July 2005

People produce waste - it's an unchangeable fact of life. But we can change how much we generate and what we do with it. To keep on top of waste, our businesses should aim to measure the waste they produce in the first place. Once we know how much we produce, we can then identify how to improve our waste management and the FM services we can offer.

More than ever before, facilities managers and contractors are having to allocate time and budget to keep up-to-date with their legal requirements in order to minimise their potential liability. Facilities managers are often in the enviable position of carrying out a job with great variety.

The role could involve responsibilities as diverse as waste management, outsourcing, landlord and tenant issues, and building maintenance security.

But this variety means that an equally wide range of legislation and changing regulations driven by environmental issues affects FM. Could this be an opportunity for the FM industry to drive positive, sustainable change in business? By leading this agenda, FM will start to shift its influence to more strategic risk management, promoting resource efficiency, waste reduction and reducing operating costs.

Why business waste is important to us allUK businesses produce an estimated 100 million tonnes of waste each year, of which about five million tonnes are hazardous, and cost business over £15 billion per year. Often FM is at the sharp end of waste, responsible for waste management, waste contractors and even dealing with hazardous waste. Unfortunately, waste is a problem growing at around 3 per cent each year. Waste costs for many businesses have doubled this year and are expected to increase even further over the next few years.

While waste cannot be eliminated, we can reduce its environmental impact by preventing waste wherever possible, and making more sustainable use of the waste that is produced. Traditionally designed products and services are failing and traditional businesses may go down with them. Practically, to maintain our resources at current levels we need to reduce the impact of individual products and service systems drastically - probably to 15 per cent of our current levels by the middle of this century.

Waste contributes to climate change through greenhouse gas emissions.

Waste prevention reduces gas emissions from landfill, emissions from incinerators, reduces emissions from energy consumption in manufacture and increases the storage of carbon in trees. For example, recycling office paper for one year in a building with 700 staff reduces greenhouse gas emissions by 220 tonnes of carbon dioxide. This is the equivalent of removing 40 cars from our roads every year.

Although some business waste is recycled, a considerable quantity - as high as 65 per cent - still goes to landfill. This not only risks damage to our environment, but also represents a massive waste of natural resources, which will sooner or later hold back economic growth and lower everyone's quality of life. This is why our businesses - and FM contracts - are increasingly being asked to bear the environmental costs of their waste management and why the landfill tax is currently rising at £3 per tonne every year and will be £35 per tonne at the end of the decade.

Quite apart from increased taxes, businesses often underestimate how much their waste costs them. They may not take into account the cost of buying materials that become waste, or the value of any waste materials, packaging and other resources that will be thrown away. And don't forget about water, energy and other utilities that can easily be wasted through excessive use, unnecessary use, or simply by being left on - either knowingly or not. Did you know, for example, that energy is the largest controllable outgoing in an office and experience shows that simple good practice measures can easily reduce energy costs by up to 50 per cent?

So reducing waste is better for the environment and for our bottom line too.

Why we need to manage wastePeople produce waste; it is a fact of life - a fact that we cannot change. However, what we can change is how much we produce, how we manage it and what we do with it. Indeed, managing waste in a sustainable way, optimising recycling and re-use, as well as limiting production, forms a core part of this Government's policy to protect the environment. And the Government is committed to stamping out waste. Earlier in April 2005, the Government announced extra funding, giving real opportunity - and money to the tune of £284 million - to support resource efficiency in business.

The aim of the new funding is simple. It is intended to reduce business 'waste' in the widest sense and embodies the principles of the waste hierarchy - eliminate, reduce, re-use and recycle waste - the cornerstone of the Government's sustainable waste management policy, that sets out the order in which options for waste management should be considered based on environmental impact.

"A wide range of industries, from manufacturers to retailers, can save literally billions of pounds a year by cutting waste

and improving resource efficiency, often with little or no investment," said Elliot Morley, Minister for Environment, at the programme's launch. "By getting involved, businesses of all sizes are set to boost profits while reducing environmental impacts."

If you don't measure it, you can't manage it!

Any business that produces waste has a duty of care to know what wastes they are and where they go. To keep on top of waste, our businesses should aim to measure the waste they produce in the first place. Once we know how much we produce, we can then identify how to improve our waste management and the FM services we can offer. Eliminating or reducing waste or changing from landfill disposal to re-use or recycling should reduce our impact on the environment and save money in the longer-term.

Did you know, for example, that many businesses lose around 4-5 per cent of turnover as waste, yet experience shows that businesses could save around 1 per cent of turnover through simple yet effective techniques to minimise waste? What impact could resource efficiency have on your business?

Elliot Morley said that the new funding programme had already received strong support from the business community, with some organisations having already collectively helped businesses in the UK to achieve over £1 billion in savings.

"Their environmental contribution to date is hugely encouraging: diverting millions of tonnes of waste from landfill, cutting millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions along with other benefits, such as reducing water consumption," he added. "Reducing waste has always been a profit opportunity; in today's consumer, economic, ecological and regulatory environment it is becoming a necessity."

Help is at hand

Businesses can get involved, and get advice through Envirowise. It offers free, independent, confidential advice and support on practical ways to increase profits, minimise waste and reduce environmental impact. Envirowise can help make your business more competitive and profitable, and ensure that you always comply with environmental legislation. The website has been designed to give you access to information, guides and industry-specific advice, whether you are just beginning to address the environmental issues facing your business or you want to pursue specific aims (www.envirowise.gov.uk). Since 1997, Envirowise has helped UK businesses save around a staggering £1 billion through the free products and services it offers to help combat the rising levels and costs of waste.

Further information

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