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Q&A: De-bottling the workplace

This week's eco-topic: Green workplace

Your eco-questions answered:

Question: I am trying to do a few things around the office to make it "greener." My office is in Riverside, CA; my boss is not concerned at all about being green. But -- I order all supplies, and stock everything so I have a small chance to make a difference.

We go through a large amount of water bottles a day. I started to recycle, but because she will not pay for a recycle bin (if you know how to get a free one in Riverside county please point me in the proper direction) I have to store and take them myself off the clock. I have considered glass cups and a filtered water pitcher instead -- I am concerned the waste from buying a water pitcher and filters is much too -- any ideas on what to offer?

I have already switched to mugs for the coffee, and we use Panache coffee made by the coffee bean international, I remember reading somewhere that they are not fair trade certified, but pay fair trade -- is that correct? Any office ideas would be helpful. --
Melissa

Answer: Kudos to you for going so far as to institute a personal bottle recycling program! To save the planet as well as your time and energy, definitely ditch the water bottles and switch to a filter system -- especially since your office is already set up with coffee mugs, which will work just as well for filtered tap water.

Responsible Purchasing Network's guide to water bottles (PDF) outlines the main financial, environmental, health, and political reasons to take back the tap -- and also gives you some examples of cities that have banned bottled water purchases for its employees. Guess what -- L.A.'s one of those cities, thanks to a 2005 executive order from Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa after the media reported that the city had spent nearly \$90,000 on the plasticky stuff.

If you're concerned about the plastic waste from those replaceable Brita filters (though these are still a big enviro-step up from bottled water), consider the ceramic filter, which

requires less maintenance, generally holds more water, and is popular with environmentalists.

As for your Pachama coffee: The website's under construction, but Pachama belongs to Coffee Bean International, which does offer some fair trade and organic certified coffees. Look for the fair trade and organic logos on your coffee packages to make sure you're

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Q&A: Green consultants and guides

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Your eco-questions answered:

Question: My work is working (no so hard) on trying to "green" the office. I am wondering if there are any consultants who will come in and assist with greening an office building, and/or guides which you might recommend.

Especially helpful are guides which stress the money-saving options, and how to best take advantage of those. If it doesn't save money, it probably won't fly. -- Cassandra

Answer: If your office is in Santa Monica, the simple solution's to take advantage of Sustainable Works Business Greening Program, FREE to Santa Monica businesses. This city-funded program will send a green expert to do an on-site assessment, give targeted recommendations, then work with businesses to prioritize and implement the recommendations they choose. Afterwards, the now-green business can apply for Santa Monica Green Business Certification to proudly tout its enviro-consciousness.

Not in Santa Monica? Then contact your city council member to ask that your city fund this Business Greening Program. Basically, any L.A.-area city can get Sustainable Works' services -- but the city needs to first pay up.

Outside city-funded programs, finding a greening consultant is almost too easy these days. Why? Anyone can call themselves a greening consultant. After all, there's no national greening consultant test or qualification system. The trick now is identifying the reputable green consultants and organizations are out there to get the good eco-advice you're looking for.

A good place to start might be with an eco-audit of your workplace from a trusted organization. As I've talked about before, eco-auditors can analyze which aspects of the business have the biggest footprint, as well as what eco-initiatives to undertake to get the most footprint-shrinkage per dollar.

You might also consider a responsible purchasing consultant to help your business spend its money wisely. Responsible Purchasing Network, a project of New American Dream, offers consulting services and has worked with many businesses and government offices to help them green their workplace. In fact, if you work for the state or local government, you can apply to get pro bono assistance from RPN! Get your proposals in by March 10.

As for greening guides: RPN also provides FREE online guides to help green your office purchases. In addition, there's the "Greening the Office" booklet I recently reviewed. Despite some of its shortcomings, this pocket guide will get you started on making your workplace eco-friendly.

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