

Win-Win-Win: Employers, Employees, And The Environment

By Jennifer L. Jackson

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The continually rising cost of gas and goods is making it more expensive for Americans to go to work, and is also increasing the cost to operate places of employment. At the same time as employees and employers are facing these new economic challenges, the movement to “go green” is gaining momentum. There are five simple steps that employers can take to help save the planet, improve the job satisfaction and efficiency of their employees, while saving money and increasing productivity.

According to the Center for Urban Transit Research, the average American commutes 30 miles to work each day, and spends almost \$140 per month on gas for their work commute alone. In 2005 the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey estimated that Americans spend 100 hours per year on average commuting to and from work, which seems a very conservative estimate, and ironically is still 20% more than the average 80 hours per year that Americans take off work for vacation time. For employees, long commutes to work result in stress-related health issues, problems in personal relationships, and substandard job performance. Employers also suffer in that long commutes cause higher rates of tardiness and absenteeism, and employees have decreased concentration and increased resentment for their jobs. Clearly, the amount of traffic congestion created by the masses commuting to and from work each day contributes significantly to air pollution and global warming.

Allowing employees to telework (“telecommute”) can make significant improvements in their productivity, job satisfaction, personal budget, and overall quality of life. Employers benefit from employees working from home as efficiency and productivity increase, while overhead and occupancy costs decrease. The environmental and community impacts of widespread telework include decreases in traffic congestion, air pollution, parking problems and energy consumption. The primary objections voiced in opposition to telework are the increased costs of technology and IT support for employees working from home and a managerial aversion to indirect oversight. In reality, the increased costs of technology and IT support are minimal when compared to the savings associated with telework; PC World estimates that telework lowers corporate real estate costs by 25% to 90% per year, and the International Telework Association and Council reports that employers save 63% on absenteeism costs per teleworker per year. Managers must part with the notion that direct oversight is necessary for employees to work diligently. Employees that work hard and communicate effectively in the office will do so at home, just as employees that waste time gossiping and taking cigarette breaks will do that at home - their respective efforts are a reflection of their work ethic as individuals. It also

begs the question; if you can't trust an employee to work from home, why were they hired in the first place?

All employees and all positions are not equally suited for telework arrangements, however, there are still ways in which employers can help to offset the problems associated with mass commuting. Offering employees bonuses for carpooling is inexpensive and highly effective. Employees that carpool have a less stressful commute because the actual amount of driving they have to do is reduced, and also because the time spent commuting can be passed by reading or talking to fellow carpoolers. Employees that carpool both save and earn in this arrangement; they save on gas and car maintenance (because of reduced mileage), and they earn a financial bonus from their employer as well. Offering a carpool bonus as an employee incentive is also good for employers - they have happier employees that are more punctual, less stressed, and more productive as a result, and in some situations can save on the amount of employee parking that they must provide. The way in which employers structure this benefit or incentive varies based on the size of the organization, the funding available, and the desired impact of the program. One zero-cost option is to designate preferred parking spaces for carpoolers. Environmentally, carpooling cuts down on vehicle emissions, gas consumption, and traffic congestion. Finally, though it is less common and reduces the expected benefits associated with carpooling, some employers offer employees bonuses or incentives for purchasing and driving hybrid vehicles to work.

Unfortunately, public transportation systems in the United States lag behind those of our industrialized counterparts in Europe and Asia, though there is usually sufficient public transit within urban centers of the States. Many employers already have programs designed to compensate employees for the cost of utilizing public transportation as a means of commuting to work, and with soaring gas prices, more employees are now electing to participate in these programs. Some businesses have put a spin on this idea and are paying employees by the mile to bike to work. Obviously there are limitations to these solutions; public transportation is only an efficient means of commuting to work in city centers and (some) immediately surrounding metro areas, and biking to work is not realistic if the individual has a lengthy commute, no means of freshening up once arriving at the office, or when there is inclement weather. Even so, when public transportation (or walking, biking) are viable options for the work commute, employers have the ability to encourage their employees to exercise (perhaps literally) these environmentally-friendly alternatives.

Flexible scheduling ("flexible hours") is an arrangement whereby an employee is involved in selecting their own work hours, and sometimes workdays. Many companies that offer this flexibility require that employees are present during core business hours (often considered to be between 10:00am and 3:00pm), some designate a window of time in which all the hours must be worked (for example, the employee must work eight hours sometime between 6:00am and 8:00pm), and some employers institute a combination of these requirements. According to a survey conducted by the Hudson Highland Group, almost half of all American employees would prefer to change the mix of cash and benefits that they receive from their employer, with 33% of them identifying flexible

hours as the benefit they would most like to see. Forty-three percent of recent grads told Jobtrac.com that the ability to work flexible hours was the most important employment incentive for them. For employees, flexible scheduling means that they are able to take care of personal business (doctor appointments, child's ballet recital, etc.) and not lose hours in the office. Employees also benefit from a shorter commute time if they no longer have to travel during rush hours. From the employer's perspective, flexible scheduling nearly eliminates productivity lost as a result of tardiness and absenteeism, and their employees are less-stressed and enjoy a healthier balance between work and life. Environmentally, flexible scheduling helps to alleviate rush hour traffic congestion and the related air quality issues.

Most American employees, however, are still going to have to show up at the office on a regular basis. Once arriving at the office, in addition to generating work product, American employees also produce an astronomical amount of waste. The Clean Air Council estimates that Americans throw away 2.5 million plastic bottles every hour, toss out enough aluminum cans to rebuild our entire commercial air fleet every three months, and trash enough office paper to build a twelve-foot wall from Los Angeles to New York City each year. Given the number of hours the average American works each year, and the time of day that most of these hours are worked, it can be inferred that a vast amount of this waste is produced in the workplace. Employers have the ability to change these trends, at absolutely no cost, through a policy of mandatory recycling in the place of employment. In the same way that a dress code or standards of professionalism are established, enforced, and eventually engrained into the culture of the office, recycling can begin as an expectation and become a positive norm. The employer must simply place four bins (paper, plastic, glass, aluminum) in areas easily accessible to all employees, inform their employees of the new recycling policy, and make arrangements for regular pick-up with the local recycling center. Fortunately, the Clean Air Council also tells us that recycling works: "recycling an aluminum can saves 96% of the energy used to make a can", and "one ton of paper from recycled pulp saves 17 trees, 3 cubic yards of landfill space, 7,000 gallons of water, 4,200 kilowatt hours (enough to heat your home for half year), 390 gallons of oil, and prevents 60 pounds of air pollutants."

The benefits of a workplace recycling program differ from the previous four solutions in two significant ways. First, the benefits to the environment are direct in this case and the benefits to the employee and employer indirect, second and more importantly, it is the one solution that is applicable to all places of employment across the board.

Employers are interested in attracting and retaining the best and brightest employees, and the suggestions presented here are popular and proven methods of accomplishing this goal. Employers obsessed with the bottom-line should know that nothing is better for high productivity than happy employees. As for the environment, a Native American proverb says, "we do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children," and by all estimates, we are in severe debt.