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Working greener Practical steps every office can take

By Carol L. Schlein

For as long as I can remember, I've tried whenever possible to be environmentally sensitive. In my formative years, we had several droughts that made me conscious about how we use and waste water. In high school, I was one of the founders of the first ecology club. I got my driver's license shortly after gas prices nearly doubled and recall being constantly reminded to turn off lights when I left rooms

These experiences have made me aware of how my activities impact the environment. We've again watched gas prices soar, food prices rise and have seen evidence of how our cumulative work and home activities are causing the acceleration of global warming.

So, what can we do to be more environmentally conscious?

It's impossible to discuss going green without addressing the perennial question: "Should we leave our computers on or shut them off when we leave the office for more than a few hours?" This is still a controversial question. The argument in the past to leave computers on had to do with things like possibly breaking the on/off switch or damaging the hard drive by turning the computer on and off. I'm not convinced there's still a valid technical reason to leave a computer on. The How Stuff Works website says, "If it were a significant problem [turning computers on and off daily], then machines would be failing all the time. In fact hardware is reliable (software is a whole different story) and there is a lot to be said for rebooting every day." The author also observed, "I don't know a single person who leaves the TV on 24 hours a day. TVs contain many of the same components that computers do. TVs certainly have no problems being cycled on and off."

This certainly is something to think about. Servers should be left on so they can be backed up overnight while most, if not all, active files are closed. My sense is that the decision to turn off a workstation computer should depend on whether you need the files backed up or will remotely access that computer. Most monitors are set to turn themselves off after an amount of time. (You can right-click on your computer desktop and choose Properties (or Personalize on a Vista workstation) and check the power-management settings. And since screen savers keep power flowing to the system, it's better to have the monitor shut off after a period of inactivity.

Most computers have a power setting that allows them to "hibernate." This feature was designed for battery-operated computers such as laptops and, I believe, should not be used for desktop computers that are connected to power outlets. In fact, I have been told by several software vendors that the hibernate option can wreak havoc on database programs since it interferes with proper closing of databases.

Similarly, there is a setting for network cards that allows them to be turned off to save power. While the description of the setting sounds like it would be good to enable, I have been advised by many software companies that this option should be unchecked under the power-management settings for the network card. If you're in the market for new computers, consider that laptops use much less power than desktops, although they do cost more for the same power and storage.

Other power savers

Consider replacing incandescent bulbs as they burn out with new compact fluorescents. Lower wattage bulbs are much brighter than those they replaced. While they must be disposed of with hazardous waste because of a small amount of mercury, they last much longer, generate less heat, cost less over time and use about 75 percent less energy than the type of bulbs we've been using since the 1920s. The early compact fluorescent bulbs were bulky and ugly. Newer bulbs make them difficult to distinguish from incandescent. The federal Environmental Protection Agency's website (http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=cfls.pr_cfls) has a lot of good information about these bulbs

including suggestions about where they work best such as in fixtures with good surrounding air circulation.

Law offices are heavy users of paper and despite our best intentions to use less, we may never be truly paperless. What we can do, though, is take steps to reduce the amount of paper and recycle what we do use. The easiest step is to use e-mail instead of fax or overnight mail and encourage those with whom you correspond to communicate by e-mail. Make a conscious effort to read e-mail on your monitor rather than printing the messages. Scan your firm's letterhead so that you don't need special paper for correspondence, envelopes and invoices. Route internal documents via e-mail or messenger functions instead of printing them.

If you must send a fax, consider combining the substantive part with the cover sheet. If I fax a letter to a client, I add the number of pages and telephone number at the top of the letter. Similarly, when sending bills, there's no need, if you're doing your billing promptly and clearly, to include a cover page explaining you are attaching a bill. This has been one of my pet peeves over the years. Don't you think your client recognizes a bill without a letter telling them a bill is attached? Most billing programs allow you to include a message to explain any special circumstances.

Less paper

Even if you can't fathom sending paper documents to clients or adversaries on recycled paper, there are still ways to reduce the use of new paper. Start by consciously using less paper by reviewing drafts on your computer monitor. Spell-check and try to get to as close a final version as possible and use the Print Preview option to view the document on the screen before printing. I've stopped printing pre-bill worksheets to review my firm's monthly billing; instead I review bills on my monitor. I've encouraged my clients to receive their bills by e-mail to save paper, postage and time.

In the past, to clear the accounts-receivables balance, I've printed paper bills for matters that had no new activity other than a payment to bring the balance owed to zero. I use a billing program (LexisNexis Back Office powered by Billing Matters) that allows me to preview bills and post them without printing them. Some other billing programs also allow you to post without printing. While in the big scheme of things, this is between 10 and 20 pages per month, over the course of a year, it's closer to 150 pages.

Another tip is to print on both sides of paper. I'm sure it's partially generational, but I still prefer to print some things while my younger assistants are more comfortable reading on their monitor. To atone for my preference (sometimes it's so that I can take it with me when I won't be near a computer), I'm diligent about printing internal documents on the back of previous print jobs.

Another way to save trees: Make your office manual accessible online rather than printing it. Think about how your office records telephone messages. Are you still using paper messages? Consider switching either to voice mail or practice-management software that can record information needed for incoming and outgoing phone messages

Carbon footprint

There are many ways to reduce your carbon footprint. Start with recycling bins to encourage staff to recycle paper and soda cans. Think about ways to handle refreshments to lessen the environmental impact. One client has a small soda concession, similar to those in restaurants, where the staff can use paper cups rather than aluminum cans. Consider your options for coffee. Does the staff have mugs or are they using hot cups? Some of the single-serving systems end up leaving a lot more garbage than traditional coffee pots. Take a good look at your firm's kitchen — do you use paper plates and plastic utensils or reusable plates and flatware?

How's the office temperature? You may not be able to control this, but you may want to discuss options to use less heat or air-conditioning during evenings and weekends. If your office is too cold in the winter and everyone uses space heaters, maybe it's time to consider if there's a better alternative.

In suburban New Jersey, it's difficult to get anywhere without a car. As the price of gas has soared, we're all watching our disposable income increasingly used for transportation costs. If your office is near public transportation, find ways to encourage employees to use trains, buses or even carpools. If you're considering relocating the office, keep the public transit and employee locations in mind. Alternative schedules won't work for every office and law practice, but you might consider staggered work hours so employees can avoid rush-hour traffic.

Remote access is one of the most environmentally friendly tools available. Products like GotoMyPC, Logmein, Windows Remote Desktop and Terminal Services allow employees to set up their office computer as a host. Using an internet browser, you can connect to your desktop and work

as if you're sitting in your office. Programs like Webex and GotoMeeting allow firms to have virtual meetings with groups of people, each at their own computer. I use GotoMeeting to provide group training sessions and remote assistance to clients instead of traveling to their offices. Since actively using these tools, I've seen my business mileage drop dramatically, saving gas costs, car wear and tear, and most important, my time.

If you don't think taking small steps can make a difference in the environment we leave to the next generation, consider this quote from the EPA: "If every American home replaced just one light bulb with an Energy Star qualified bulb, we would save enough energy to light more than 3 million homes for a year, more than \$600 million in annual energy costs and prevent greenhouse gases equivalent to the emissions of more than 800,000 cars."

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