

Rocking the status quo

Employees are an under-exploited resource in business efforts to reduce greenhouse emissions. Richard Collins studies one program taking up the challenge.

A three-year-old uses half their calorie intake on brain function, an adult just 18-30 per cent. Little wonder, notes organisational change expert Stefan Grafe, that humans are so resistant to change. The head of next Market Management Consultants says the most energy-efficient option is to retain the status quo.

“Making change happen is simply bloody tough,” he told a Banksia Foundation forum audience last year.

This goes some way to explaining why so few companies get cultural change initiatives right, with seminal Australian research in 1998 showing 67 per cent of such programs faltered.

“Plus sustainability is not well understood by people. A lot of it is about preaching and threatening, about rules and procedures rather than tapping into people’s own motivations,” said Grafe.

Despite these unflattering starting points, Stephen Hale says interest is rising in corporate circles about engaging and motivating workforces around sustainability issues. Over the last three years Hale, a director of Impact Employee Communications, has been rolling out an employee engagement program called GreenLight, designed to help companies reduce energy use, mainly through education and good housekeeping. There has been such an uptick in interest that 12 months ago the Ogilvy PR business spun off a new unit, called EcoImpact. Qantas, Woolworths and George Weston Foods are just a few of the names on its speed dial at the moment, but others over the years have spanned sectors including paper, packaging, defence and professional services.

Three years ago, Amcor’s fibre packaging site at Smithfield in Sydney became the guinea pig for the GreenLight employee communications program, developed by Impact and the former NSW Department of Energy, Utilities and Sustainability.

The site had already trimmed annual demand by five per cent with a series of technical fixes and was looking for the next step. Turning to the soft side of human resources cut its energy use another eight per cent, mainly by reducing consumption off-peak, both overnight and on weekends. Hale hasn’t looked back since.

Seeking change and staff support

The business case drivers vary. For some it is a strategic response to the corporate social responsibility agenda, a story to tell when customers, the media and a growing list of other onlookers come knocking. For others it is about staff attraction and retention, and others again pursue it in response to government requirements to cut energy and water use.

Hale adds another: growing public (and employee) concern over climate change and the legacy we are leaving our kids. George Weston Foods, for example, included the children of staff members in a launch video for its program last year, along with shop floor staff talking about what they are doing at home, from running cars on biodiesel to recycling water.

next’s Grafe has a simple change equation: the effect of any change initiative is a function of technical expertise multiplied, crucially, by motivation. Has climate change really jumped the psychological barrier from public concern to employee issue? Is there now staff buy-in?



Get it right and employees can be a force for sustainability savings.

Several studies last year taking the public pulse on climate change suggest it has. A report by STW Group subtitled 'Climate change and its implications for business and brands', based on a survey of 1,000 people and series of focus groups, found 86 per cent would think more highly of their employer if they were "addressing the climate change issue".

A NSW Government phone poll, 'Who Cares about Water and Climate Change in 2007?' found business ranks a close second to the Federal Government in the perception of who should take major responsibility for reducing climate change impacts. It's not just among the white-collar crowd either. The survey of 825 people found those without trade or university qualifications are twice as likely to nominate climate change as the state's most important issue compared to those with the qualifications.

These numbers are reinforced by Impact's unique insight into employee motivation around energy and environment, based on staff surveys before every project, some 4,250 employees across 10 sites. Questions tease out what employees think the environment is, what it means to them specifically and what the barriers are to better performance. The cumulative findings reveal 77 per cent think changing employee behaviour could save energy, with 56 per cent claiming they know what they can do to achieve it.

Keep it simple, stupid

Hale is a big believer in keeping it simple. Give people a long list of jobs and they glaze over; give them a few tasks linked to their job and you have a much greater chance of change, however incremental.

Start small – switch off the machine at the end of the day, for example – and provide plenty of feedback to build the momentum. Put it on the agenda at the regular toolbox sessions a lot of companies run for their production teams.

"Most sites struggle a little at the beginning because it seems like a hassle, even though they know it is important," said Hale. "But once you get the first results, you will never see a more amazing turn around in terms of employee dedication. The research is pretty consistent on each site."

Still, he says few companies are doing enough to inform and engage staff, to collect their ideas and to give permission to action them. One of the problems is the key performance indicators can be tough to pin down. Another is the expectation that the programs will quickly pay for themselves. In the main they won't, but Hale says leaders are moving strongly in that direction, pointing to Woolworths where he is helping establish Eco-Ambassadors in each of its 2,800 outlets nationally. Staff engagement is shaping up as a key part of the corporate social responsibility agenda.