RECYCLING IN BUILDINGS

Waste. Rubbish, wheelie bins and men in fluoro vests.

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Not exactly something many people want to think about at work. So long as the stuff goes away on a regular basis and doesn't cause them too many problems it's all fine. Isn't it? Well, not exactly, no. In fact, in our carbon-conscious society, it's probably something that builders, building owners and facilities managers will start to think about more and more. We all know that energy and water are going to be significant considerations for buildings, but what about the waste?

So why does this matter so much? It matters because firstly, landfills are a major source of a climate-terrorising greenhouse gas – methane (which has 21 times the greenhouse impact of carbon dioxide according to the Department of Climate Change). Secondly, it matters because most of that material lost to landfill represents a loss of the valuable energy taken to extract raw materials and form them into useful products in the first place. The energy expended in mining minerals and processing them is massive when compared with collection, transport, sorting and recycling. Aluminium is a classic example; it takes one-twentieth (or 5 %) of the energy to make aluminium cans with recycled feedstock compared to using freshly mined raw materials (Sustainability Victoria, 2006). In fact, energy savings can be gained from recycling most materials, plastics, paper, even building products like concrete, sand and bricks.

Recycling is a win-win scenario on environmental terms: less messy, ugly, methane spewing landfill and greater energy efficiency and hence lower greenhouse gas emissions. If you are still wondering why buildings mangers need to care about this, it is because there is a good chance your parent company and customers are about to care very much.

It is likely that under the new National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Act (2007) corporations emitting greenhouse gases over prescribed thresholds will be required to report energy production and consumption (www.climatechange.gov.au). This will include indirect emissions from activities such as disposal of waste from 1 July 2008. Reporting your greenhouse 'footprint' is only a small part of the story; companies will also need to implement actions to make savings in every area they can. Diverting wasted materials away from landfill is one of these opportunities.

The WA State Government is taking the connection between waste and climate change very seriously. In the Premier's Climate Change Action Statement (2007) Alan Carpenter committed to a series of actions for Western Australia to tackle climate change including several that were directly related to increasing recycling or reducing methane emissions from waste (www.premier.wa.gov.au).

Even without the mandatory reporting requirements, corporations are starting to realise that customers and staff are judging a company's environmental performance with an increasingly judicious eye. Any corporation worth its salt is looking to move corporate social responsibility (CSR) to becoming a core business function, not just a gentle nod to the 'warm and fuzzy' extras (The Age, 20 March 2008).