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The Zero Waste Office: Is it Possible?

Source [Jonathan Bardelline](#)

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Zero waste. Zero emissions. Zero everything.

It's one of the latest, and ultimate, environmental concepts. Reduction goals can change again and again, but there's nothing below zero (unless you consider the growing trend of companies and products being carbon-negative or climate-positive -- but let's get to zero first).

Large corporations like [Wal-Mart](#) and [AAMCO](#) have declared ambitious zero waste goals, so it should be possible for an office to get there, too, right? It depends on what you're looking at.

There are enough products, technologies, processes and organizations in place to make it possible, in a sense, to have a zero waste office (which for our purposes means no waste and zero greenhouse gas emissions). Zero waste in the purest sense just isn't possible yet, but by utilizing what is available, an office can get pretty close.

"At this time zero waste is more of a journey than something that can be achieved," said Larry Chalfan of the [Zero Waste Alliance](#), a non-profit consortium of educational, government, business and other groups. "Too much of the things we need simply aren't ready for us to truly be zero waste. That said, a lot can be done, and many organizations make the goal 'zero waste to landfill' and then further define it to mean over 90 percent of waste being diverted into reuse or recycling."

Before taking up a zero waste program, an office should conduct an audit of what it's using and tossing out. Initially, abide by the first word of the "reduce, reuse, recycle" mantra. Cut down on the things you're using instead of switching wholesale to eco-friendly alternatives. Encourage employees to print less and you're saving paper, energy, ink, toner and time. The money saved through reductions could help offset the added costs of some green products or fund other green initiatives. You'll also need someone dedicated to the goal, or a zero-waste committee, to oversee the project -- figuring out where recyclables and compostables will go, researching renewable energy projects and other tasks.

Where you can't use less, use smarter. Recycled paper. Refillable pens, pencils and ink cartridges. Reusable, biodegradable or compostable plates, cups and utensils. CFL bulbs. Rechargeable batteries. Solar-powered calculators. There has been a boom in eco-friendly products across all industries, and there's no shortage of products with at least some green aspect. The major office supply chains are adding green products to their catalogs, and at

the other end, eco-friendly office supply stores are selling conventional products, too.

Greening the Cube: Planet-Friendly Office Supplies

TheGreenOffice.com is one of many green online stores, but has one of the most extensive and informative catalogs. It was founded in 2005 and labels each product with its green credentials: recycled content, biodegradable, compostable, reduced chemical content and third party certification such as [Energy Star](#) and [Green Seal](#). The store also has conventional items where green options don't exist with the intention of providing one place for shoppers to go, and letting customers support a green business even when what they are buying isn't so green.

"The office products industry has very few products that are designed from cradle to cradle," said Alex Szabo, founder and CEO of the TheGreenOffice.com. "Today we encourage people to make the best decisions they can."

The company grew out of Szabo's work as a sustainability consultant. One of his first recommendations for businesses is to set up a green purchasing policy, but he couldn't find a one-stop solution for green office items. "We're working to really speed the transition to sustainability in the workplace," he said, but it won't happen through retail sales alone. "Manufacturers, designers, really need to take into account the full lifecycle," he said. And that can be pushed along with encouragement from customers.

Although San Francisco-based [Waldeck's](#) also has an online store, it's had a physical retail presence for over 50 years and started focusing on green products four years ago. Owner Clifford Waldeck had served on environmental boards and commissions and said he wanted to practice in his business what he was preaching outside of it. Waldeck's downtown San Francisco store is in the middle of towering offices -- just the place green products belong, Waldeck said. "Having a retail presence brings the green message hands-on to the consumer," he said. But retail stores with an overarching green focus are few and far between. Although there has been much investment in the clean tech industry, Waldeck wishes there was investment in green retail.

Easier places for many to find green products are the large chain stores that are getting in on green sales. In 2003, Office Depot launched its Green Book, a catalog of 1,300 environmentally preferred products. It now contains more than double that, and even more products are on Office Depot's [Buy Green](#) online store section. The company offers items in various shades of green, for instance paper containing anywhere from 10 percent recycled to 100 percent post-consumer paper. "We believe the most effective path to sustainability is through encouraging more people within more companies to take small steps with the environment in mind," Melissa Perlman, Office Depot's public relations manager, explained via email.

Even office furniture is being designed to have a lighter impact on the earth. [McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry](#) (MBDC) run the [Cradle to Cradle \(C2C\) Certification](#) program, which labels products that have "environmentally intelligent design," and has certified 12 office chair brands. MBDC's certification process not only looks at the actual products -- determining if it can be fully returned to nature or recycled endlessly -- but also at the materials in the item, what energy the manufacturing process uses, what type of and how much water is used and the company's social responsibility track record. MBDC also consults with companies to improve their products, working with them to improve the

recyclability of products, said Assistant Project Manager Emily McDermott. "Some of our clients have product takeback programs where you take it apart and send them the box of pieces and they make sure the materials are recirculated into their products," she said.

MBDC has certified about 100 products from 43 companies, with about 20 more in the works. Products applicable to offices include floor coverings, office furniture, workstations, envelopes, whiteboards and all-purpose cleaners. McDermott said MBDC is especially interested in certifying more consumer-oriented products. "We feel it's necessary to offer Cradle to Cradle certified products on shelves at stores," she said.

One of the biggest names among MBDC's certified products is Herman Miller, long a leader in sustainable office furniture. In an [interview with GreenBiz.com last year](#), Paul Murray, Herman Miller's Director of Environmental Health and Safety, explained why the company believes that right way isn't always the easy way. "It took thousands of man-hours to secure an offline database documenting every chemical and material used in every Herman Miller product," Murray said. "Was it easy? No. But the result is we're going to have greener products for the future."

Every green product comes in variations. Recycled content ranges widely, and even if an item has 100 percent recycled content, it matters if it is post-consumer (from items discarded by consumers) or pre-consumer (waste from the manufacturing of new products). It's better to go with post-consumer when possible. With recyclable items, you also have to take into account what happens at the end of their life. It doesn't do much good to buy recyclable items if your local recycling program doesn't accept the materials it's made of. Some areas have more recycling programs available, and include more types of materials, than others.

When items can't be recycled, they can sometimes be reused, so check with schools and community centers, or see if there are local groups like the Oakland, Calif., [East Bay Depot for Creative Reuse](#), which accepts donations of a wide range of items. Electronics are a trickier subject. There are very few that contain significant amount of recycled content, but luckily more and more computer manufacturers, retail stores and organizations take back electronics or hold e-waste drop-off events.

A Broader Definition of Trash

The other type of recyclable trash, in a sense, is food waste and other compostable materials. Setting up a compost bin in an office might not be appealing to everyone, but some areas have compost pickup programs, you might have space outside the office to set up a compost bin or an employee might have their own at home and be willing to take the added waste. Just like donating items that would otherwise be trash, by asking around, it's possible to find almost anyone who will take anything if it's free.

While an office can have strict control on the things it buys and uses, it doesn't always have power over what gets sent to it. Mail can bring in unwanted paper, packaging and waste. Again, reduction is the first step. Make email communication standard and get off [unwanted mailing lists](#). The USPS has a variety of C2C Certified priority and express mail packages and envelopes, and shipping companies like FedEx and UPS have recycled-content packaging for those times when mailing is necessary. Packaging materials can also be reused over and over. And if you have to buy your own, there are biodegradable peanuts available, or the ubiquitous and recyclable newspaper.

Physical waste aside, offices also have energy and emissions to contend with. Although installing a solar panel system or geothermal system might be too much for many offices, there are alternatives that can support renewable energy and carbon reduction projects locally or elsewhere.

[Green-e](#) has become the leading verification program for renewable energy certificate and greenhouse gas reduction projects. Jeff Swenerton, Green-e's communications director, recommends first reducing energy, then checking with local utilities to see if they have green pricing programs for buying local renewable energy. Although such programs are growing across the country, Swenerton said the average participation rate is less than 2 percent.

If a utility doesn't offer a green pricing program, there are renewable energy certificates available to anyone. Prices vary by area and type of energy. Although you won't end up receiving energy directly from a renewable source, you'd help show there is support for renewable energy. Intel, which recently made the [largest renewable energy purchase](#), did not buy just the cheapest energy, Swenerton said. The company bought renewable energy where it has facilities along with cross-section of energy types.

If you have the resources, budget and space, it's possible to get your own energy from the sun, wind or earth. What comes into play, though, is how much control you have over the building you're in and the surrounding land. The same goes for renovations like better windows and insulation to make an office more energy efficient. Figure out what you have control over, and go from there.

Going carbon neutral or reducing carbon emissions by purchasing carbon offsets is one of the most-boasted claims by companies going green. But experts agree that it should be one of the last actions to take, focusing first on reducing energy use, cutting emissions related to employee commuting and other factors you have direct control over.

There are a number of carbon calculators available online: try out a couple that use different criteria to get a good estimate of your carbon footprint. Here you will also have to determine what emissions you consider as being related to the office. Emissions from energy use are clearly applicable, as are business-related air travel emissions. Most carbon calculators include emissions from employees that commute, but if you have employees that work from home you'll need to include their emissions, too. You can now also go so far as to offset the emissions from all your [shipping](#) or events you host.

As a way to reduce employee-commuting emissions, offices can adopt telecommuting policies, allowing or encouraging employees to work from home occasionally or frequently. Carpools, biking and public transit can also be encouraged, through recommending them or providing incentives for employees who choose the greener path. [Motivating workers](#) to get on board or come up with sustainability goals is a big part of greener offices.

Taking up all these measures can help an office get as close to zero waste as possible. As stated before, there just aren't enough products and processes in place to ensure every item lives in its own closed loop and will for sure be recycled or reused. And any purely zero waste office would include restrictions that could be unpalatable to some employees. Bringing your own lunch? Better make sure it doesn't include any packaging that will have to be thrown away or else you'll need to take your trash home with you.

Despite the inability to have absolute zero waste, things are better than they were a few years ago. More stores are stocking green products, recycling efforts are spreading, renewable energy and carbon reduction projects are available all over the world, more groups and consumers are pushing companies to make greener products and there is a growing awareness across all industries of the need for everyone to reduce their impact on the earth, whether at home or the office.

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