

KEEP AMERICA BEAUTIFUL

Title: Improving Workplace Recycling through Convenience, Configuration and Communications

The workplace is a critical environment when it comes to improving recycling. According to the most recent EPA data, it is estimated that as much as 45 percent of municipal solid waste is generated in workplace/commercial settings. So as we think about the numbers of offices across the country, even in Maryland alone, try to imagine the amount of office paper, plastic containers and packaging, and aluminum cans that are consumed daily. This makes the workplace a prime location to increase recycling and reduce waste.

According to the “Recycling at Work” research, commissioned by Keep America Beautiful with support from PepsiCo Recycling and CBRE, the most significant recommendation to improve recycling in the workplace is to provide employees with a desk-side recycling bin along with a much smaller trash bin. This practice, known as the “Little Trash” method, has shown the following results:

- Increased recyclables from 65 percent to 85 percent, and decreased contamination in the recycling bin by 20 percentage points.
- Reduced the amount of recyclables in the trash from 29 percent to 13 percent.
- Reduced the amount of office paper in the trash to almost zero.

The same research, which included pre- and post-employee survey input, showed that employees with little desk-side trash bins had increased recycling awareness and knowledge. Researchers suggest that this bin set-up helps motivate participation, in part, because it is convenient and restricts some recyclables from easily fitting into the trash bin. This sentiment was supported by research participants, as they believed “different-sized bins really helped.” There were also solid results in the bin configuration with an equal-sized trash and recycling bin. For those offices that already have bins, ensuring that the bins are properly labeled and there is ongoing communication is important. Finally, for the information-only scenario (where participants were not provided new bins and signage, but just used what they had and received the communications), there was an increase in knowledge of recycling, but there was no significant increase in recycling based on the waste audit data.

The common areas of the workplace can be a bit trickier. It’s recommended that recycling and trash bins are paired together, both with simple and consistent signage. Posters with the most common recyclables are often helpful and informative when posted directly on the recycling bin.

“Recycling at Work” was conducted in four cities and 34 different offices. During the six months of the study, a waste audit was conducted for each office, each month. Participating employees were surveyed before and after the research was conducted.

“Our research clearly shows that by combining specific-sized trash and recycling receptacles, with simple, consistent signage and messaging, businesses and other organizations can increase employee participation and improve their rate of recycling of office-generated materials,” said Jennifer Jehn, president and CEO of Keep America Beautiful.

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Most research conducted about recycling behavior has focused on residential or curbside environments. In a national poll of adults 18-65, commissioned by Keep America Beautiful, 87 percent of respondents indicated that they typically recycle in their home, but only 41 percent indicated they do so in the workplace. Furthermore, 50 percent of those respondents indicated that it is difficult to extremely difficult to recycle in the workplace.

To help improve workplace recycling, here are some helpful tips to follow:

- **Make workplace recycling easy.** Use the “Little Trash” method at desks. In common areas, pair recycling and trash bins with easy-to-follow signage.
- **Be consistent.** Establish a consistent recycling and trash bin set-up, as well as a collection program, throughout the office with hopes of eliminating confusion among employees. Similarly, be consistent with signage, emails, fliers and other informational materials.
- **Take advantage of resources.** For more research findings and recommendations, go to recyclingatwork.org

BIN SET-UP CAN BOOST RECYCLING

Improvement in Bin Content

