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Green Your Office

10 tips for reducing your carbon footprint at work

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You know the scene: You're at the office. It's lunchtime. You enjoy the last bite of your takeout soup-and-sandwich combo and look down to find...your very own paper and plastic trash heap. That's a messy affair in the moment, but here's the upside:

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, as much as 90 percent of our workplace waste is recyclable—and a good chunk of that can likely be reused or eliminated altogether.

"Reduce, reuse, recycle. It's a general guideline for how to reduce your environmental impact as you go through daily life," says [Darby Hoover](#), an NRDC senior resource specialist. "And it's a good mantra for the office." To keep your productivity at work from being a drain on the planet, Hoover recommends beginning with small adjustments to your daily routine. "Start with things that are tangible and easier to accomplish," like recycling, "and build the confidence to tackle larger strategies."

Here's a 10-step primer to get started.

1. Create a green team.

"Creating a green team with employees from all divisions of an organization is something a lot of workplaces have done very successfully," Hoover says. Involving everyone, including support and maintenance staff, is key. "Often administrative staff are the ones who do a lot of printing and know how to reduce waste associated with the copier. The folks who clean things know what people are throwing away. They see what happens in the kitchen." As a group, you can recommend changes, such as investing in EnergyStar office equipment, low-flow toilets, or sink faucet aerators.

"These kinds of recommendations have more sway coming from a green team," Hoover says. "Individuals might not have as much power."



Roman Milert/J23RF

2. Encourage recycling and composting.

If your office doesn't have a recycling program, work with your office manager and custodial staff to set one up for paper, aluminum cans, and plastic bottles and containers (check the local government website to find out what is accepted for recycling in your community). Push for composting, too. If your office does offer one or both, encourage colleagues to participate by hanging signs that clearly delineate what to recycle and compost, and ensure that bins are placed in convenient areas.

3. Break the paper habit.

Get this: The average office generates about 350 pounds of wastepaper per employee every year. First, spend less time in the copy room. You can e-mail invoices and contracts (which can be e-signed); edit and comment on drafts electronically; skip the handouts and view meeting materials on a monitor at the conference table instead. Second, push your office to buy paper that is made with 100 percent post-consumer recycled content rather than produced with virgin materials, which generate [twice as much greenhouse gas emissions](#). It'll save energy, water, and wood and reduce water and air pollution. Finally, encourage your coworkers to recycle paper trash to keep it out of landfills, where it decomposes to produce methane, a powerful global warming pollutant.

4. Optimize printing.

When printing is a must, fit more text per page by reducing margin sizes and type sizes. Set computers and copiers to a double-sided printing mode, or print on the back of previously printed paper. To cut down on ink, print in black and white and in draft mode, adjustments you can make through your computer's print settings. And make sure your office recycles printer cartridges. An estimated [375 million](#) (at least half of the cartridges purchased each year) are either incinerated or tossed in landfills, where their slow-to-decompose plastics might linger in the environment for a millennium.

5. Curb office equipment energy consumption.

Configure your devices to automatically enter low-power modes when idle, and remember that anything plugged in sucks energy, even when turned off. To nix this drain, plug devices into a power strip and flick the "off" switch when you're done for the day. (You can keep your set-top boxes or game consoles plugged in to a wall outlet to avoid disconnecting them.) Ditch the screen saver, too. "It uses more energy than setting your screen to completely switch off after 15 minutes of inactivity," Hoover says.

6. Turn off lights.

Doing so in unoccupied public spaces like bathrooms, kitchens, and conference rooms not only conserves energy but can start (or reinforce) a good habit in coworkers. If you have your own office, consider using a desk lamp with an energy-saving LED bulb and forgoing the overheads.

7. Say no to single-use utensils and unnecessary food packaging.

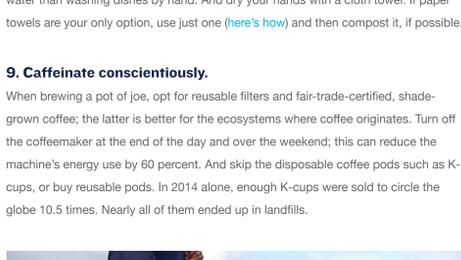
There are about [269,000 tons of plastic pollution](#) wreaking havoc on our oceans, and a big chunk of it comes from the disposable forks and spoons, sandwich wrappers, and other single-use food and beverage packaging we toss out. Indeed, less than 15 percent of plastic packaging in the United States gets recycled. Eliminate waste by bringing lunch from home in reusable containers (skip the plastic wrap and aluminum foil) and by keeping a set of cutlery, a couple of dishes, a mug, and a cloth napkin at your desk (if your office doesn't supply any). Use them when you grab a bite out or have food delivered, and tell the vendor to hold the disposables.

8. Reduce water and paper towel waste.

A running faucet releases about five gallons of water every two minutes. If your kitchen has a dishwasher, take note: Running a full load uses up to 30 percent less water than washing dishes by hand. And dry your hands with a cloth towel. If paper towels are your only option, use just one ([here's how](#)) and then compost it, if possible.

9. Caffeinate conscientiously.

When brewing a pot of joe, opt for reusable filters and fair-trade-certified, shade-grown coffee; the latter is better for the ecosystems where coffee originates. Turn off the coffeemaker at the end of the day and over the weekend; this can reduce the machine's energy use by 60 percent. And skip the disposable coffee pods such as K-cups, or buy reusable pods. In 2014 alone, enough K-cups were sold to circle the globe 10.5 times. Nearly all of them ended up in landfills.



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10. Rethink your commute and work-related travel.

If 25 percent of Americans today used mass transit or other alternatives to driving for their daily commute, annual transportation emissions nationwide would be slashed by up to 12 percent. Whenever possible, walk, bike, carpool, or use buses, trains, or light rail to get to work. If commuting by car is unavoidable, invest in a fuel-efficient vehicle. And reduce work-related travel by "meeting" with a [far-flung colleague](#) via videoconferencing and other technologies when you can. A [single round-trip flight](#) from Los Angeles to New York, for example, creates a warming effect equivalent to two to three tons of carbon emissions per person—the same load the average car produces over six months.

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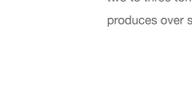
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