

## Creating Green Offices: Employee Engagement Perspective

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### Abstract

The term “green office” or “sustainable office” refers to sustainable office practices that help reduce the environmental impact of our office activities and contribute to sustainable development. This paper is a conceptual contribution to an ongoing debate on how to promote and advance green office creation and support employee engagement. It focuses primarily on initiatives which can be implemented by active employee engagement, motivation and initiative; therefore, this paper does not discuss green building design elements or infrastructural solutions of green office design. The aim of this paper is to provide guidelines on how employees can contribute to green office creation based on their initiative and motivation, and express their “green creativity” in solving everyday sustainability challenges. The paper emphasizes three basic trajectories of action: creating an enabling environment for a green office, promoting sustainable office consumption, waste management, and healthy environment.

**Keywords:** green office, sustainable office, environmental management, sustainable consumption, waste management, healthy environment, creative solutions, employee engagement.

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### Introduction

The term “green office” or “sustainable office” refers to sustainable office practices that help to reduce the environmental impact of our office activities and contribute to sustainable development. The basic principle of creating green offices is to promote continuous improvements that result in reduced or eliminated environmental impacts of office work. From employee perspective, green office theory focuses on behavioural change of individual employees that contribute to sustainability. Extending on this, Coşkun & Akar (2019) stated that there are three main criteria for green office: 1) reducing consumption of natural resources (like electricity, water, paper, etc.), 2) improving sustainable activities (like waste management, building maintenance), and 3) enhancing employees’ awareness. According to the European Green Office Handbook, there are several environmental performance indicators related to green office creation: Location and structural design efficiency, Energy efficiency, Water efficiency, Material efficiency, and efforts to improve the quality of the office environment, operational and maintenance optimization, as well as reducing waste and toxic (Povodör et al., 2010). So far the research targeting green office development is still at its infancy and calls for further elaboration and practical guidelines.

Green office practices have a high potential in inspiring employees to adopt green, sustainability-oriented behaviours that may lead to higher employee motivation as further research indicates. Concerned employees themselves, for example, are reported to be a source of pressure to address environmental issues (Renwick et al., 2012, p. 6). The employees tend to be proud in their sustainability-oriented actions. Implementing green office practices contributes to better corporate culture because employees tend experience pride and personal contribution in applying sustainable practices into daily works and caring about the environment and health. Bauer & Aiman-Smith (1996) indicated that prospective employees are more willing to work in a firm which promotes pro environmental characteristics for lowered wages. Some researchers (Fairhurst & O'Connor, 2010) indicated that highly engaged individuals with high levels of well-being were the most productive and happiest employees. Green office practices have a high potential of employee engagement.

Another line of research also indicate that top management support is one of the most important facilitators of sustainable and social initiatives (Dilchert & Ones, 2012). Cantor, Morrow, & Montabon (2012) indicated that supervisory support can have a huge impact if employees recognize that their supervisors provide the resources and feedback to participate in environmental initiatives, especially if supervisors actively cherish and support a shared vision and consensus for new sustainable organisational practices. In an attempt to create a green office, supervisors are in a position to become change agents who facilitate the integration of sustainability and CSR activities into company strategy, culture, climate, structure, and behaviour. Ramus (2001) research indicated that incentives like acknowledgement of support from supervisor helps improve employee motivation to take part in sustainability management programs. Chinander (2001) indicated that when employees are allowed to present feedback on environmental policies and when their suggestions are included there is better motivation to follow the same.

Green office concept is also a popular and relevant approach for many organizations to make a difference in the world in terms of public relations by showing their efforts towards environment, community, enhancing their image with a focus on corporate social responsibility. Frank (2003) research indicated that employees are willing to work for environmentally friendly company for lowered wages. In parallel, within companies there is a rising awareness of the urgency to integrate sustainability and social responsibility aspects into their regular business activities. As this development is primarily caused by external pressures such as growing public awareness, regulatory forces or competitive advantages, it also calls for more sustainable business strategies (Paillé et al., 2012). Cavagnaro & Curiel (2012) stated that companies tend to operate between two paradigms: the economically

oriented paradigm and the environmentally oriented paradigm where organisations need to find a balance between the two to operate more efficiently and sustainably.

This paper is a conceptual contribution to an ongoing debate on how to promote and advance green office creation and support employee engagement. It focuses primarily on initiatives which can be implemented by active employee engagement, motivation and initiative; therefore, this paper does not discuss green building design elements or infrastructural solutions of green office design. The aim of this paper is to provide guidelines on how employees can contribute to green office creation based on their initiative and motivation, and express their “green creativity” in solving everyday sustainability challenges. The paper emphasizes three basic trajectories of action: creating an enabling environment for a green office, promoting sustainable office consumption, waste management, and healthy environment.

### **Creating an Enabling Environment for a Green Office**

The success of creating a green office primarily depends on organization’s commitment on all levels, and especially on top management’s attitude and intentions. Nevertheless, the active involvement of all level management is also very important. Previous studies have indicated that the application of green office had not been optimally practiced due to low commitment and scant discussions in the study was conducted with the aim of exploring and identifying the various applications and dimensions of the green office concept among government institutions in Central Java, Indonesia (Pasharibu, Y., Sugiarto, A., Ariarsanti, T., & Wijayanto, P., 2019). The study by Chinander (2001) identified that the promotion of an effective environmental management program is dependent on the level of feedback that is obtained on specific environmental issues and capacity to communicate effectively. The promotion of feedback and communication ensures that both employers and employees are well aware of their responsibilities and communication requirements thereby ensuring better promotion of environmental management and green office promotion in the organization.

It is vital that the top management stays committed and supporting in order to ensure the green office practices are implemented effectively and sustain active staff’s participation and engagement. The commitment and clear vision of top management reassures employees that green practices are supported from the very beginning in all its implementing phases. Documentation and strategic guidelines may serve as efficient drivers for active employee engagement and motivation.

One recurrent pathway is creating green offices is by creating a Green Office

Team that is responsible for supervising, implementing and training organisation to implement green practices and sustainability-oriented organisational goals. There is a popular practice of creating green teams of employees from different departments so that green practices could cover all organizational units and become a joint team effort. Top management should ensure that green teams feel empowered and effective in their implementation and has all the necessary resources for green office management, including all training needs and expertise consulting.

Communication plays a key role in creating an enabling environment for green office creation. All employees in the organization should be communicated efficiently based on communication possibilities of an organisation. Today communication presents many options and media channels possibilities; yet, several key aspects are at play in creating an enabling environment for a green office:

- ✓ *Management commitment.* It is important to confirm top management commitment to Green Office practices. Processes will be more efficient if all levels of management are included. If possible, organisational commitment should be documented and officially communicated;
- ✓ *Green Office practice visibility reassurance.* The Green Office implementation plan should be highly visible, distributed by the most effective means, presented to employees as a poster in a visible and well-frequented locations. Communication activities may use internal channels such as organisational website, social media, Green Office bulletin, posters, etc. It is important to use effective and inspirational visual communication tools that deliver information about pollution issues (infographics) and benefits of sustainable consumption and green lifestyles;
- ✓ *Employee motivation and reward system for implementing Green Office.* Green Office creation requires many efforts and active employee engagement; therefore, it is important to motivate, praise and reward employees for their contribution;
- ✓ *Promoting feedback.* Creating a green office is a continuous process; therefore, it is important to promote employee feedback on implementation dynamics by indicating what processes are considered a success and what processes require more adaptation and improvement. Employees should feel their contribution to Green Office creation and feel values for their feedback and efforts to improve processes.
- ✓ *Training for Green Office needs.* As sustainability issues are highly complex and require much knowledge and expertise, training is a key tool for managing sustainability issues effectively. Top management should support training events and consulting expertise in order to tackle green issues more efficiently and professionally.

### Promoting Sustainable Consumption and Waste Management

Office work is subject to high consumption activities; therefore, they are key factors to make sustainability-driven changes in consumption patterns of office work that helps save expenses and reduce environmental impacts. Office work includes many operations; therefore, daily consumption in the office may be quite high such as electricity, water, paper, stationary. Changing employee behaviours toward sustainable consumption facilitates sustainable lifestyle at the office. By changing different trajectories of consumption and waste management, an organisation may expect a highly important pro-environmental contribution. Several key trajectories could be emphasized for sustainable consumption and waste management of a green office:

- ✓ *Sustainable purchasing policy.* Organisations should establish purchasing policy with higher priority to sustainable and environment-friendly products by indicating specific criteria and labeling;
- ✓ *Paper-free office.* Today many offices have a possibility to implement a paper-free office by introducing different online innovations. A goal to become a “paperless office” using modern electronic solutions is a significant contributor to sustainable development as paper product use and its minimisation is one of the most significant environmental impacts that should be addressed when implementing the principles of a green office;
- ✓ *Eradication of single-use or short-use items.* Offices should put their highest efforts to remove one-time or short-use usage items such as napkins, single-use cups, short-use folders, etc.
- ✓ *Energy and water saving.* Offices should use smart guidelines for energy and water saving like using energy saving bulbs, water saving faucets, etc.
- ✓ *Innovate and update smartly.* As offices tend to invest into their updated, modern looks, other alternatives should be also considered. Every renovation of an office requires not only purchasing new furniture and other new items, but also getting rid of old furniture and items. Therefore, a green office should consider possibilities of refurbishing old furniture, thinking long-term durability, choosing items that can be fixed and repairable.

As more organisations consider the effects of their activities on the environment, waste generation at an office is receiving increasingly attention. Indeed, the production of waste could be seen as a form of inefficiency and even misuse of resources. During this process it is important to define how an effective and sustainable waste management system functions at a green office:

- ✓ *Understandable and efficient waste management system.* A green office should introduce clear and approved waste management procedures

for reducing, reusing and separately collecting (recycling) waste. By observing and calculating waste flows, concrete measures can be implemented with specific guidelines. If needed, training sessions may provide expertise and knowledge to ensure employee understanding of new processes and policies.

- ✓ *Routine development for waste management.* In a green office employees are informed and trained about waste separation for recycling, the correct use of bins and office equipment. A display of eye-catching examples of selective waste collection (e.g. showing the bins) is highly recommended to be communicated around the office.
- ✓ *Feedback on waste management.* In a green office employees are encouraged to participate and provide feedback on waste management effectiveness and personal insights for further improvement.

### Promoting Healthy Environment

Healthy environment is one of the key elements that creates a green office. Healthy and pro-environmental organisations view indoor pollution as one of the greatest risks to human health, and these pollutants come from different office activities, products and materials sometimes not evidently visible or noticeable. Indeed, the air in our offices can be highly polluted by regular activities. In this respect, it is important to raise employee awareness and understanding about indoor pollutants by promoting the following key actions:

- ✓ *Reduction of VOC.* Only low-emitting volatile organic compounds (VOCs) products are recommended to be used that have been certified and labelled by reputable organisations. VOCs are emitted as gases from certain solids or liquids. Concentrations of many VOCs are consistently higher indoors than outdoors since VOCs are emitted by a wide array of products like paints and lacquers, cleaning supplies, building materials and furnishings, office equipment such as copiers and printers, correction fluids and carbon-free copy paper, graphics and craft materials including glues and adhesives, permanent markers, etc.
- ✓ *Reduction of harsh cleaners.* As much of office cleaning is done after regular working hours, employees are often not aware of harsh chemical use for office cleaning. A green office adopts a minimalisation strategy for the use of harsh or solvent-based cleaners. The selection of the appropriate (preferably eco-friendly) cleaning product is highly important because of the potential health and environmental risks associated with the chemicals contained in these products. Green offices tend to have a policy for green, non-hazardous, biodegradable substitutes that provide a healthy environment for employees.
- ✓ *Reduction of maintenance.* If some office elements require much unnecessary maintenance just for aesthetic needs, other solutions should be considered in order to create a more healthy green office.

Green offices should reduce using difficult-to-maintain materials with the usual high risk of dust accumulation, such as carpets or pretentious furniture that requires regular chemical cleaning.

- ✓ *Creating green environment.* Indeed, a green office calls for a green environment full of greenery, plants and healthy air flow. Today many green offices provide a special place or a room for employees to relax and maintain balance. It is often called a “zen room”. Such places attempt to remind of natural or nature-inspired places full of plants, natural light, comfortable armchairs, fresh air, etc.

### Conclusions and Discussion

The study has highlighted how green office practices can be promoted in the offices and emphasized the benefits of having green office practices in the office. This paper focused primarily on initiatives and guidelines which can be implemented in any office by active employee engagement, motivation and initiative. It emphasized three basic trajectories of action: creating an enabling environment for a green office, promoting sustainable office consumption, waste management, and healthy environment.

The proposed guidelines may serve as a reference material in creating a green office. It may also serve as a training tool for practitioners who start to implement green office practices in their organisation.

### Guidelines for Applying Research to Practice

All green office guidelines provided in this paper are provided for practical application.

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