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'Green teams' keep firms in touch with environment

This month, Paylocity, a payroll-services firm, moved into a new, environmentally friendly building in Arlington Heights. President Steve Sarowitz, 41, a Sierra Club member, worked with the building's architect to make the new office as green as his budget would allow.

Its green specifications include rubber-and-cork flooring, undersink water heaters and an open ceiling. Sarowitz then passed the green baton to employees.

He sent an e-mail to Paylocity's 157 employees asking for volunteers for a "green team," whose task would be keeping the company on an environmentally friendly keel. The 14 spots on the green team were filled 5 minutes after the e-mail landed in employees' mailboxes.

"I knew it would be well-received," Sarowitz said of the invitation.

Companies such as Paylocity are finding that it pays, physically and financially, to hand over environmental responsibility to employees.

Similar green teams around the city are keeping track of their firms' carbon emissions and then taking steps, such as having trees planted, to offset those emissions. They are establishing in-house recycling programs, encouraging each other to carpool, bike or take public transportation to work, and shutting off lights and computers when they are not in use.

"If you can reduce waste, you make a company more profitable and improve the ambient environment," said Henry

Henderson, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's Midwest office and the founding commissioner of the City of Chicago's Department of Environment.

Passing the green baton down the corporate ladder doesn't quite rank as a major business movement. It is, however, "a definite trend," Henderson said.

"People are bringing this from their own lives into the workplace," he said.

That's certainly the situation for Peter Danos, client services manager at Paylocity and leader of its green team.

Danos, 31, lived in the Los Angeles area for seven years before returning to Chicago, his hometown. In California, "I couldn't help hearing things about the environment," he said.

Danos' personal green mission began with turning off the water while he brushed his teeth and turning out lights when they weren't in use.

"It was something that became part of my everyday life. I'm pretty passionate about this," he said, which is why

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Paylocity's green team elected him its leader.

Danos spends two to five hours a week on the company's clock, plus some of his own time, researching projects and conducting green-team business. He meets with the green team once a week for about an hour, again on company time.

In its two months of existence, Paylocity's green team has kept busy. One of its biggest projects has been calculating employee travel time, how much fuel that travel time uses, and how many pounds of carbon it releases into the atmosphere.

To help reduce carbon contributions, the green team found 55 employees who agreed to work at home one to four days a week. The result? Averaged over a year, the work-at-home program will save 15,287 gallons of gas and 804.6 barrels of oil and keep 305,740 pounds of carbon from entering the atmosphere.

Paylocity's green team also bought a new coffee system that dispenses coffee into ceramic mugs as well as paper cups, and plans to purchase ceramic mugs for all employees.

"Hopefully, everybody will reuse them," Danos said.

The team has applied to the Lake County Division of Transportation's "Adopt A Highway" program, is looking for quickly biodegradable plates and napkins, as well as fair-trade coffee, to stock the company lunchroom, and plans an internal recycling program for glass, plastic and aluminum.

Not all initiatives are going smoothly. One challenge is getting employees to either carpool or use public transportation.

"It's a tricky thing," Danos said, in part because the office is three miles from the Metra station and partly because employees don't live close enough to each other to facilitate carpooling.

"We have to stay on top of that and keep pushing," he said.

Sarowitz has provided an incentive, a prime spot in the company's underground garage, for employees who assemble carpools of two or more people. He also plans to install a shower at the office for employees, Sarowitz among them, who would like to bike to work. Though he wants to do what is best for the environment, the green team doesn't have an unlimited budget with which to launch green initiatives, Sarowitz said .

"We're a growing company. ... We don't have a lot of money lying around," Sarowitz said. Some programs, such as the purchase of ceramic mugs, will cost money; others, such as buying sugar cane or cornstarch-based plates and napkins, will save money.

"Our goal is to be cost-neutral."

Budget matters aside, Danos said his boss fully supports green initiatives and has promised to sign off on them as quickly as possible.

"I have a full commitment from Steve and Dan," he said of Sarowitz and his business partner, Dan Miller.

Jamie Peters, coordinator of environmental initiatives at Lincoln Park Zoo, also has the full commitment from the zoo's executives, including President Kevin Bell.

In fact, the zoo's 14-member green team, composed of vice presidents and department heads, was assembled several months before Peters joined the zoo in June 2006. Peters, 23, coordinates the green team's efforts, spending a few hours a week working with green-team members and holding green-team meetings once every two months.

Representation from each department makes her job easier.

"It's fantastic to be able to fill in the whole zoo at one meeting," Peters said.

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The green team's job can be challenging because different departments sometimes have different priorities. For instance, Peters said, one green-team goal is to replace mercury thermometers, used to measure air temperature in animal exhibits, with non-mercury alternatives.

However, the collections department, which oversees the animals, has yet to find a thermometer as accurate as the mercury thermometers.

"It seems like a great idea in theory and a no-brainer, but we haven't been able to find a quality replacement," Peters said.

The team also wants to start composting, another no-brainer for an institution that produces so much organic waste.

However, the team still is searching for a local composting center that can handle the zoo's prodigious amount of waste.

"That's something we've had to [put on the] back burner," Peters said.

Like Danos, Peters also is bound by budget constraints, especially since the zoo is a non-profit. A plan to recycle light bulbs and another to install water filters at all the zoo exhibits are on hold because of budget restraints, Peters said.

Indeed, while green-team projects such as recycling can save money, other projects can be costly. That's what the green team at Montauk Sofa, a Montreal-based furniture manufacturer with six showrooms in Canada and the United States, discovered when it began a program to offset the firm's carbon emissions.

Montauk Chief Executive Tim Zyto launched the program after reading an article on carbon emissions while vacationing in Paris. That article prompted Zyto to assemble a green team — he and the six showroom managers — whose first task was to calculate the firm's carbon emissions.

"He called me one day and asked how I was getting to work," recalled Maria Giangrasso, manager of Montauk's Chicago showroom. "I thought it was a strange question."

Giangrasso said the team spent three months figuring out the average yearly mileage of employees, delivery drivers and customer-service people, and finally arrived at the answer: 292,103 miles a year.

The team then hired a Toronto-based consulting firm for advice on how to offset the carbon emissions. Among the answers: plant trees in various locations, among them Louisiana and Uganda, and recapture methane from coal mines in Pennsylvania. The cost: \$40,000 a year.

Those thousands might come off the top line, but other green-team initiatives, such as sourcing wood from managed forests to build sofa frames, may very well boost Montauk's bottom line. Giangrasso said that customers who visit the showroom perk up when told about the source of the wood frames, plus other organic materials such as latex, not polyurethane, foam.

Once they get over the initial sticker shock, she said, most customers are willing to pay more for those organic touches.

"Customers are starting to pay attention to this," Giangrasso said. "They ask if we're green-friendly, and what our initiatives are."