



Environmentally Responsible Fit-Outs

| By **Stephen Parkins** |

Office fit-outs, relocations and renovations, if not undertaken responsibly, can and do have detrimental effects on the environment – and it is not hard to see why.

Consider the number of individual offices there are around Australia burning electricity for lighting and air conditioning, together with the fact that the average life of a fit-out is only around five years before renovation. It is not like your family home.

There are two main occasions when you should consider what you can do to minimize your footprint on the environment – when you renovate and when you relocate. This article looks at the more practical ways businesses can lessen not only the impact on the environment, but also on their cash flow.

Minor Renovations To An Existing Office

What can be done to existing office space with regard to minor renovations?

Reuse: there is only one thing better than recycling and that is reuse! There is nothing more environmentally sustainable, nor cheaper, than an item that does not





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need to be made or bought, because you already own it. Consider respraying or re-covering furniture. For example, current workstations may simply require new tops and new screen fabric to be made like new again, often at only a fraction of the cost and impact on the environment.

Energy saving hints: when it comes to office equipment, energy usage can be quite high. Photocopiers, scanners and printers should be able to go into standby mode when not in use and when the office is closed. They should be able to be easily switched off; if this cannot be done at the unit, then it needs to be easily done from the wall outlet.

Office computers should be set to optimize power usage – most computers have power saving settings as part of their operating system and, once reset by IT (information technology) personnel, staff should be encouraged not to ‘readjust’ them.

Think seriously about the need to keep computer servers running 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Sever equipment kept running unnecessarily over a non-working period may not contribute a lot to energy bills, but spare a thought for that air conditioning system that runs continuously for 8,760 hours every year when it could run for as little as 2,500–3,000 hours!

Relocating To A New Office

When it comes to relocation, the scope for an environmentally friendly office really opens up.

Relocation and transport: when relocating, you should consider access to and the availability of public transport for staff. This will not only ease the congestion within often limited staff parking areas, but also assist staff when they are required to move to other areas of the city as part of their duties, and will minimize the impact on the environment and provide a cost saving to businesses, not to mention your potential clients and visitors.

Multifunctional partitioning: if partitioning is required, can it be made to be reusable and

multifunctional? For example, a demountable wall system can allow for 100% reuse for future office configurations or relocations – thereby not using Australia’s precious resources and landfill and also saving money.

Australian made: it is important to keep furniture units modular to facilitate extending workstations or cabinets by simply adding another unit, rather than throwing away large parts and making new. Good-quality, Australian-made modular workstations and furniture should, where possible, be used. Buying furniture from truly local sources not only makes good sense from a community perspective, it often offers faster and easier access to adding extra sections of furniture and/or reconfiguring work areas, while at the same time using less ‘energy’ in the form of fuel to transport goods from interstate and/or overseas manufacturers, thus reducing the carbon miles and footprint of your business.

What the client wants: when businesses are in the process of selecting proposed designs for office fit-outs, the client needs to take an active role. Fit-out contractors must be encouraged to reuse furniture and materials where possible and should specify materials that are environmentally preferable – products low in chemical content and, where possible, from renewable resources. These can include worktops low in formaldehyde content, using Linoleum instead of vinyl for kitchen flooring, or the use of veneers from renewable forests.

Lighting efficiency: too many offices have a master set of switches in the reception area only and nowhere else! Not being able to switch lights off in, for example, the manager’s office when he or she is on leave for three weeks is clearly a waste of both resources and money. Movement sensor switches that automatically switch lights on and off are another option for dark corners, rooms infrequently used and/or meeting rooms.

In any relocation, energy-efficient lighting is essential and anything that can be done with regard

to complementing, not destroying, a building’s energy rating must be looked at.

It may be an idea to design your office lighting layout in such a way that on the brighter days, rows of lights can be shut off and easily turned back on when the clouds come over. Of course, it is important to ensure that staff have sufficient light in order to perform their duties, however, some of it can come direct from the sun.

Natural light: the office space should be designed to have as much access to natural light as possible. One of the most effective ways of achieving this is with the ‘open plan’ office – the fewer walls constructed the more light there will be to spill through. When used in conjunction with movement sensor lights, this option will realize maximum light efficiency and lower electricity costs.

Air conditioning: open plan offices have another advantage over heavily built up office spaces when it comes to the operation of air conditioning and its environmental impact. Most office air conditioning is designed for minimal fit-outs only and with the smallest unit possible running absolutely flat out trying to keep up the pace. It is much more economical to have a larger inverter air conditioning unit installed that can comfortably cater for your needs; it will last longer and require much less maintenance.

There are many government incentives for environmental credits and other ‘carrots’, most regarded as little more than paper shuffling [and as we have seen, they can be taken away as fast as they are rolled out]. However, there are some very real effective and proactive actions business owners can take to help protect the environment for generations to come. **ABS**

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