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Industry experts find ways to make old buildings 'greener'

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Going green in an existing office building, in some instances, can literally be as easy as looking out the window.

Exposure to natural light is one of several ways experts suggest to make workplaces environmentally friendly, even if they aren't originally designed as such.

Existing buildings appear to be caught in a vortex between newly designed structures aiming to seek official "green" certification and simple household efforts toward becoming earth conscious while saving on utility bills.

However, turning a workplace into a green zone involves far more than replacing conventional light bulbs with those twisty fluorescent ones that are sold in nearly every store lately. An entire retrofit may be required, including a new air-conditioning system or even a new roof that deflects rather than absorbs heat.

Return on investment improves

The good news is that the process is less expensive than it used to be just a few years ago, and it appears to be getting cheaper all the time.

"What was hard before is becoming a little bit easier," said Andrea Tyson, VP of strategic planning with the Naples office of WilsonMiller

Inc. and chair of the Urban Land Institute's Southwest Florida chapter.

The return on investment in greening a building had been deemed too expensive only a few years ago, yet the materials and equipment required are more readily available and reasonably priced, Tyson said.

That includes mostly everything from sensors that adjust lighting and climate whenever people are using an office or meeting room to paint and carpeting with low or no volatile organic compounds normally associated with "new" scents.

"Not only is this becoming more socially attractive, it is good business," Tyson said, adding that WilsonMiller itself has set its own goals toward becoming a green company for the benefit of itself and its clients.

While making working spaces green doesn't require any sort of formal certification, it does take a time investment of three to four months that some landlords aren't as amenable to, Tyson said.

"It is a long process," she said, "but there's no good reason not to do it."

Advice plentiful, often free

Getting help in going green doesn't even cost anything, as utilities are offering free energy audits along with various savings tips.

Those that have greened their offices already are often willing to share what they have learned at no charge. For example, Grady Pridgen, a

longtime St. Petersburg developer who lately has become an advocate for environmentally sustainable buildings, has heralded a 35 percent reduction in power and water use at his Westbay Corporate Center complex.

"We have to look at things the old-fashioned way, which is long-term planning," Pridgen told local members of the CCIM Institute during a presentation this past summer.

Besides paying closer attention to who turns out the lights at closing time, building owners and managers are focusing green efforts on parts the public doesn't normally see.

Hig Rodriguez Dillinger, president of Commercial Industrial Roof Services Co., or CIRSCO, has promoted the use of "white roof" replacements that prevent heat absorption, thereby requiring less work on the part of a central air-conditioning system.

"The interest level is real high," Dillinger said. "The energy savings over time is the most attractive feature."

Making the green process simpler for owners and tenants is a key to encouraging participation, WilsonMiller's Tyson said. For example, some offices aren't located in areas without local recycling programs.

"We have to implement some levels of practicality," she said.



Pridgen