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Go Green (environmentally) to Save Green (in dollars)

Make Your Office Energy Efficient: Saving energy in the workplace results in saving money. Learn how to use energy in your workplace more efficiently.

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Some dismiss efforts to save energy as something only PC-minded tree-huggers pursue. Others view energy efficiency as a way to build bottom-line results.

Independent contractors are finding more and more ways these days to cut costs by using less. How's your energy-usage profile these days? You can start by answering some simple questions: Is your office computer constantly on, even when you're not using it? Are your building lights also burning brightly, even if there's no one in the room? Have you examined your heating and cooling systems — as well as kitchen appliances and other equipment — to see if they're Energy Star-qualified for efficiency?

In the end, you stand to save hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars in operating costs by either changing bad habits or replacing gri equipment. Here are on how to get started:

You don't have to overhaul everything overnight. Like a couch potato now determined to get in physical shape, it's best to start off g investing in energy-efficient equipment and systems when it's time to replace them," says Mark Laska, president/CEO of Great East New York-based firm that consults with clients — including independent contractors — on ways to save energy costs. "Sustainability be achieved all at once. When it's time to replace or upgrade boilers, ventilation systems, ceiling fans, air conditioners, windows, ins roofs, consider green options for an immediate return."

Uncle Sam has a plan. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provides information on best practices for small businesse effective energy usage, claiming that owners can save significant costs using its guidelines at http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=sb_guidebook.sb_guidebook. Among many other tips: Clean refrigerator coils twice a year, and replace refrigerator door gaskets slips out when closed between the door's seals. Use sensory lighting in the office, so it automatically switches off when no one is th light' whenever possible, via windows. Check to see if your office computers have power-management software. If not, order it. If sc seek to replace older, energy-using machines in the office with those given the federal government's 'Energy Star' label for energy e

Try the free market. If you run your independent-contractor shop in a deregulated market, energy-supply wise, you can chose a sup your utility company. Competitors can offer you a plan where you can either lock in on a fixed rate, or allow it to float with market shi who are seeking to keep costs on a level field for the indefinite future, a fixed rate would be preferable, says Jeffrey Mayer, CEO of Stamford, Conn.-based retail natural gas and electricity supplier for both residential and commercial customers, including independe "Fixed-rate energy plans safeguard your business from unexpected increases in energy costs — regardless of whether prices rise b disasters, limited supply, or political crises," Mayer says. "If history is any indicator, locking in energy rates is one of the most sensib do to lessen the financial impact of the volatile energy market. Imagine the savings if it had been possible to lock in the price of gas years ago."

Time to change the light bulbs. Replace your standard lights with what are called CFLs, or compact fluorescent lamps. CFLs use 75 energy and last up to 10 times longer longer than ordinary light bulbs, according to the Department of Energy. They also use less heat, so cooling costs in the hotter months.

Tap into water-smart items. Check out what the federal government is calling 'waterSense' products (www.epa.gov/watersense) to water, like low-flow toilets. "Client demand for these technologies is increasing," Laska says. "So why not use them in the home offic home, retrofitted with water-efficient fixtures, can save 20,000 gallons per year, according to the EPA."

home, retrofitted with water-efficient fixtures, can save 50,000 gallons per year, according to the EPA.

Products with solutions. Beyond Energy Star-approved and waterSense equipment, there are tons of products that can enhance your buildings. Nansulate (<http://www.nansulate.com>), for example, provides a line of coating insulate for walls that both help better the winter and keep them cool in the summer, saving up to 40 percent in costs.

Energy efficiency and independent contractors/small businesses by the numbers

\$60 million: What small businesses spend on energy every year

10,000: The number of small businesses that have taken advantage of energy-savings programs through the federal Energy Star program

45 percent: What you can save on kitchen-based office bills by using Energy Star-qualified equipment.

20 to 50 percent: The amount that lighting typically accounts for, with respect to share of energy bills for small businesses. Compact fluorescent lamps, or CFLs, cut down energy usage by 75 percent.

600 million units: The number of CFLs sold now annually

SOURCE: EPA, Worldwatch Institute

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