Reducing Service Sector Emissions Impacts

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For most office based, service sector businesses the main direct emissions impacts are from light and heating of offices and to a lesser extent from water use and use of materials such as paper and card. These direct emissions are normally massively outweighed by indirect impacts which come from business travel, employee commuting and in the case of travel business the products/services they sell to clients.

Leased offices provide reduced scope for direct emissions reduction, primarily through policies to reduce energy usage where it is within the tenants control. These range from ensuring that equipment is not powered up when not in use, especially for computers to implementing energy saving lighting. Building insulation and often heat and light are controlled to a large extent by landlords and require negotiation and discussion with landlords.

Indirect emissions are the biggest impact and the biggest challenge and the solutions to reduced impact begin with policy and budgeting/measurement of impact. Business travel has always been measured as a cost centre in businesses, but the emphasis is on cost and to a much lesser extent environmental impact. Travel management companies have for many years been providing some data on travel emissions for reporting purposes, and this rarely extends to active carbon budgeting in companies to support reduction targets from indirect emissions. Travel policies linked to carbon impact can deliver support for reduction, by linking carbon targets to activity to support informed support for travel decisions and emissions impacts.

Support for modal analysis at the point of purchase or planning for business travel can deliver reduced emissions. Primarily this will be driven by mode or transport choices not simply avoided travel. Use of rail and hotel for short haul or domestic journeys can both improve use of time and employee wellbeing, in addition to reducing emissions where air was the primary choice of travel mode. In some cases, journeys that involve several people can be undertaken effectively by car, not rail depending upon both duration and vehicle type used. Comparisons can be made and stored for reduction monitoring and reporting purposes.

The use of video meetings has rapidly increased over the last decade and the decision to use this as an alternative to travel has clear benefits that can be measured by participants in support of corporate emissions reduction targets.

The location of a business and its employees is another driver of indirect emissions. It is common for many service business to have a commuting mix amongst their employees that includes both private car and public transport. This has an impact on emissions that can be mitigated by supporting public transport and bicycle usage to reduce emissions. Many companies offer incentives for their employees to avoid car use and in the case of bicycle usage this has benefits beyond emissions reduction.

Working practices also have the capacity to support emissions reduction from commuting, with many companies offering the ability for employees where practical to work from home. Any changes in working practices can be measured and supported through internal engagement with employees alongside the demonstration of positive impact on emissions. This can extend the corporate benefits of emissions reduction to staff retention and engagement, by aligning corporate values with those of individuals.

Requiring suppliers to a service sector business to operate emissions best practice can drive improved supply chain outcomes. Many RFPs or RFI’s contain sustainability criteria but often this does not extend to impact measurement which is a better test of a supplier’s performance than policy statements alone. Using measurement of impact from service providers is a proven and well-established approach for service sector companies to support emissions reduction.

The overall contribution of the service sector to emissions is considerable, but frequently seen as less important than large manufacturing, power generators or airlines with sizeable emissions outputs. Service sector businesses will have clients and suppliers in these categories or use their services as a core part of their service delivery either via power/equipment use or business travel, and can make an impact on emissions reduction through, measurement, policy and monitoring of business decisions and operational guidelines.

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