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IFMA Boston 2010: Energy management and the end user

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One of the hurdles to reducing energy consumption in the workplace is successfully reducing waste at the user level across the organization. My sense is that, in the electronically heavy 21st century office, unlimited energy resources are taken for granted and it's all about productivity. My own experience with energy management over the past few years has been more frustration than success, even though I was dealing with a highly educated and sympathetic workforce. Rather than try to understand why people didn't make more of an effort to take advantage of opportunities to address unnecessary waste, such as shutting down a PC and monitor when away from the desk, I found myself complaining about the lack of cooperation and indifference from a population that, to all appearances, should have been motivated to participate. After all, we're not talking about impacting people's comfort levels or convenience we're talking about simple things like recycling and shutting off electronic equipment when not in use. OK, so it's a little inconvenient but not a burden. Personally, I'm pretty committed to reducing waste and helping the bottom line. Rather than analyzing the plug load problem for a reasonable solution I fell back on complaining and committed my efforts to what could be accomplished 'behind the scenes' through retro-commissioning of equipment and adjustments to building operations. My frustration was my lack of ability to leverage the very large potential for both energy reduction and good corporate behavior.

Recently, I've come to realize that in order to be really effective in reducing waste, end-users in the workplace need to be encouraged to embrace the initiatives on their own. I've had the good fortune of being enrolled in a sustainability management course at Harvard Extension School as well as consulting for athenahealth Inc. in Watertown Mass. as they address their goal of becoming more sustainable. Along with learning a more logical approach in the classroom, I have been able to observe a different approach in the field. What I heard in several meetings at athenahealth was that these plug load efforts should not be mandated. They really need to happen at a grassroots level. It's simple human nature: If you tell me I have to do something that seems peripheral to my core job requirements and requires a behavior change, I'm more likely to resist it. If, however, you share the verifiable/quantifiable facts (improvement to the bottom line, reduction of greenhouse gases etc.) and make information on concrete actions that I can take available, it's much more likely that I'll see the logic and benefits and make the choice on my own. I've heard this message in several variations from the employees we interviewed to date. My hope is to learn from this and encourage employees to participate in the process. The potential is substantial. I plan to document the process; the successes and missteps, what worked and what didn't, and determine if there are any 'magic bullets' to capture the elusive plug load potential in a meaningful way.

Stay tuned for updates on how we addressed this critical component of energy management.

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