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Sustainability, climate change and you: Building efficiently

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There is no shortage of information about the state of the environment. If you look through your daily newspaper you'll probably see at least one story related to climate change and, in most cases, that story will most likely be about a growing concern with the state of the environment. What does it mean to achieve sustainability? As defined in Wikipedia:

Sustainability is an attempt to provide the best outcomes for the human and natural environments both now and into the indefinite future. It relates to the continuity of economic, social, institutional and environmental aspects of human society, as well as the non-human environment. It is intended to be a means of configuring civilization and human activity so that society, its members and its economies are able to meet their needs and express their greatest potential in the present, while preserving biodiversity and natural ecosystems, and planning and acting for the ability to maintain these ideals in a very long term.

In other words, how do we live our lives comfortably without eventual depletion of the finite natural resources that are such an integral part of our everyday life?

As managers of the built environment we all need to become more savvy as to how we manage our buildings to make them as efficient as possible. Technology is changing rapidly to accommodate environmental concerns, but a lot more needs to be done. As energy costs increase dramatically, the need to reduce consumption becomes an economic necessity. A much larger concern however is the long term damage to the environment that a poorly designed and maintained building will create. To see what a state of the art environmental design can accomplish and to learn about LEED designations go to www.usgbc.org/News/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?ID=2590.

Why do we need to take this seriously? The quality of life for our descendants will be irretrievably changed if we don't, and the longer we wait to address climate change, the more radical the solutions will need to be in order to mitigate the damage. Doom and gloom, you say. Unfortunately, we are rapidly approaching a condition in which mandatory changes may be required. There isn't a single, valid, scientific study in existence that can refute what the vast majority of climate scientists have been warning us about for years. If we don't significantly reduce our dependence on fossil fuels in the near future, the continuing buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will most certainly cause serious problems with weather and the relative predictability we've known for thousands of years.

What can you do? As someone responsible for how buildings and furnishings are built and maintained, you owe it to yourself, your company, and your family to educate yourself on what steps can and should be taken to reduce waste and damage to the environment.

For good general information on climate change, rent the DVD "An Inconvenient Truth," Al Gore's attempt to explain what has happened to the environment and what the consequences will be if we don't take the threat seriously and take action to reduce the production of carbon dioxide. Forget about any political concerns you might have about our former vice president, the fact is, he does a very good job defining the problem. As for building specific concerns and solutions, there is no better place to begin than with IFMA's Green Zone <http://www.ifmagreenzone.org>.

Some websites devoted to environmental concerns and remedies are: Grist available at <http://www.grist.org/>, which manages to blend in some humor with worthwhile information and E, the Environmental Magazine <http://www.emagazine.com/>, which does a good job of explaining how we're affecting nature and what we can do to create a more sustainable future.

Harvard University has undertaken a very aggressive campaign to reduce its carbon footprint. For a sample of what initiatives have been undertaken access the following website (<http://www.greencampus.harvard.edu>). There are a number of useful links on a variety of green issues.

For some suggestions as to what you can do to educate yourself, check out the following facilities specific websites on sustainability: www.greenbiz.com/sites/greenerbuildings/index.cfm, and www.squarefootage.net/index.htm.

The good news is that there is no shortage of worthwhile information available to learn about climate change and what we all can do to make the necessary improvements.

The task is daunting but the need to address these issues is inevitable. The more you educate yourself and take the lead on making changes, the more of a hero you will be in every sense of the word.

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