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IFMA releases study: "Temperature Wars: Savings vs. Comfort"

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The International Facility Management Association (IFMA) has released "Temperature Wars: Savings vs. Comfort," a new study that takes an in-depth look at the most common thermal complaints made by workers and the variety of ways facility professionals respond to them.

For many years, IFMA has surveyed facility professionals to learn the top office complaints among employees. Respondents consistently cite the temperature being too hot or too cold as the most frequent grievances they hear – surpassing high noise levels, limited space and unpleasant odors. Recent IFMA research also shows that many facility professionals are adjusting the thermostat to higher settings in the summer and lower settings in the winter in an effort to cut energy consumption and costs. This 2009 study identifies when most thermal complaints occur, the nature of the complaints, and the actions taken to make workers more comfortable and able to concentrate on their jobs.

Not surprisingly, survey respondents again report that the most common heating, ventilating and air conditioning complaints they receive are that the temperature is too cold (94%) or too hot (91%). Indoor air quality complaints are a distant third (25%), followed by too drafty (21%) and too noisy (16%).

Building occupants adjust to thermal comfort issues in different ways, the most common of which are through the use of personal fans (66%) or by a change in clothing (64%). Also popular with workers, though not with building management, is the use of personal heaters, which 60% of facility professionals report seeing. Many survey respondents say that personal heaters are not allowed, however, because they present a fire hazard. Other responses include using stand alone air conditioning units, blankets and even small wading pools under the desk.

"We have people with lap blankets and fingerless gloves on," said one respondent. "Sad, isn't it?"

When it comes to addressing occupants' thermal complaints, 90% of facility professionals say they check the temperature in the area where the complaint was made to see if it is within standards; 87% validate that the HVAC system is working properly; and 75% adjust thermostats to provide for greater worker comfort.

Less popular responses include encouraging the occupant to wear layered clothing (35%) and temporarily moving the worker to another area (4%). Others report taking a vote of all occupants in a given control zone; asking people for a budget code to charge them for additional costs associated with running units more than agreed upon parameters; or simply doing nothing.

"We sometimes say we'll make an adjustment, but don't," said one respondent. "This actually seems to work."

"Usually, a prompt response saying that we are handling it is key," said another. "Then, we follow up in a couple of hours to find out if the 'adjustments' made an improvement. Often, we haven't actually

physically done anything to change the temperature."

During the summer months, survey respondents say they hear complaints that the temperature is both too hot (66%) and too cold (58%). However, 57% of facility professionals say their company does not relax the dress code during the summer to improve occupant comfort, whereas 43% say their company does. Summer "pre-cooling," a practice in which cool outdoor air is brought into a building at night, was reported by 47% of survey respondents.

The majority of those surveyed say temperatures at their facility are centrally controlled and cannot be regulated by individual occupants (56%). Forty two percent say that temperatures in their buildings are zone controlled, allowing facility managers and sometimes occupants to adjust the thermostat, and 2% report buildings that feature individual occupant or work station temperature control.

Energy efficiency is of prime importance to facility professionals, with the vast majority of respondents saying they utilize a number of energy saving techniques. Seventy seven percent say that they have updated or replaced an HVAC system or components; 73% have verified that their building automation system is working as designed; and 52% have installed more efficient light fixtures to reflect less heat. Common responses also include modifying ductwork (27%), installing new window shades (24%) and adding window film to improve thermal properties (24%).

The survey was drafted with the assistance of several HVAC experts and taken during June and July 2009. It is based on the responses of 473 IFMA members, with a margin of error of approximately +/- 5%.

For your free copy of "Temperature Wars: Savings vs. Comfort," visit www.ifma.org/tools/research/surveys/HVACSurvey2009.pdf

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