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Where's My Cup? Offices Find It's Not Easy Going Green

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It wasn't a dignified move, but Philippa Dunjay felt she had no choice.

A strategist at an ad agency owned by Deloitte, Ms. Dunjay, 31, had just sat through a nearly two-hour meeting while visiting the firm's London headquarters. Another one was beginning shortly, and she was feeling parched.

Too bad. Deloitte had recently undergone a sustainability campaign and removed all disposable items from office kitchenettes, including cups. She checked the cupboards for glasses. No luck. Desperate, she stuck her head directly under the sink tap and gulped, water dribbling down her chin.

"I was so thirsty," she says. She was especially in need of refreshment, she says, because she'd been walking laps around the office for a while in search of the correct meeting room.

Around the globe, more offices are going green, jettisoning disposable dishware, installing motion-activated lights and rethinking trash practices to curb waste. Such changes are popular. Surveys show employees are more drawn to companies with sustainable business practices and that they support the efforts. But the rollouts aren't always smooth, leaving workers irked and cupless—and occasionally, bedeviled by insects or sitting in the dark.

LaCreshia Griffin-Pope, a 32-year-old casting assistant with ViacomCBS at the company's Hollywood location, says the company first took her personal trash can. Along with Google and Etsy, her office recently moved to using communal bins, which some say can cut down on waste and prompt spontaneous social interactions when workers cross paths while en route to the trash.

Then, this year, her office's disposable cups vanished. "A lot of people were pretty annoyed," Ms. Griffin-Pope says, noting that without disposable cups, employees had to plan in advance when getting water.

Changes to the office-supply ecosystem can activate a bunker mentality. Ms. Griffin-Pope says news of the cup change triggered a scramble for the disposable ones. "Everyone went racing to the kitchen to grab cups before they were gone," she says. "They took whatever they could carry." She nabbed a handful as well.

Gavin Harrison, who works on real estate sustainability at Deloitte, says the firm is "really proud to be single-use free," adding that the company has provided reusable cups to employees. ViacomCBS says it gave employees reusable water bottles and cups to replace the disposable items. Both companies say they provide cups for guests.



Chuck Hosier's company kitchen before the change.
Photo: Stacey Hosier



Mr. Hosier launched a campaign to eliminate disposable plastic cups and utensils at work.
Photo: Stacey Hosier

Other firms have kept personal trash cans, but stopped changing liners as frequently, with occasionally discomfiting results. “I was like, why do we have gnats everywhere?” says Rachel Doyle, a 33-year-old account manager outside Detroit. While the cans were still emptied daily, certain trash, such as overripe fruit, would leave pest-attracting residue, she says.

Like many, Ms. Doyle says she is thrilled her employer has taken steps to become more environmentally friendly, including phasing out disposable cups and plastic stirrers. “If you google straws and sea turtles, it’s horrifying,” she says. “We don’t want to add anything to that.”

Rachel O'Malley, 24, takes the occasional green hiccups in stride. An assistant softball coach at Kentucky's Morehead State University, Ms. O'Malley works in an office with motion-activated lights, which regularly go dark when she's sending emails at her desk. "Sometimes I'll just wave my hands over my head, but sometimes I'll do a whole yoga routine, or practice my TikTok dances to get them back on," she says.

Share Your Thoughts

Has your office rolled out green initiatives? What's worked and what hasn't? Join the conversation below.

Some corporate sustainability efforts are top-down, but many involve employees who have become green evangelizers. "For 10 years I've watched people walk up to the water cooler and fill a plastic cup, drink and throw it away. People were doing that all day long," says Chuck Hosier, 50, vice president at a medical publishing company in New Jersey.

Prompted by the birth of his children, Mr. Hosier spearheaded a recent successful "Plastics are not fantastic" campaign to eliminate plastic cups and utensils at his firm.

"We're stewards of the planet," he says, adding that someday he'd like to see a world where single-use plastics are as taboo as smoking.

After the reality-TV company he was working for eliminated disposable cups last year, Jeffrey McMahon, 43, a video editor in Los Angeles, began buying bottled water instead of opting for a reusable mug.

"It can be a fast-paced environment," he says. "A lot of people don't have time to strategize what they'll drink out of." Though communal mugs were available, he says they often gave his water an unpleasant coffee tinge.



To help employees make the transition, MCE Systems trained staff on how to properly wash company-provided mugs.

Photo: Liran Weiss

According to Environmental Protection Agency statistics, the U.S. produced 1.1 million tons of plastic plate and cup waste in 2017, with most of that ending up in landfills. Reusable bottles remain a minority choice, with 32% of Americans reporting that they use them, according to a survey in 2019 by Shelton Group, a marketing agency.

For workplaces eliminating disposables, a key question is who will do the washing up, as software maker [SAP SE](#) discovered after issuing mugs to staff last year at its Hudson Yards location in New York. Employees were originally expected to wash their own mugs, with separate mugs and glasses kept on hand for visitors that were cleaned by facilities staff. The system didn't last.

“We saw a mix of folks using the guest stash of mugs rather than their own, and not taking responsibility to wash their own mugs or put them back,” says Julia Clark, digital marketing manager with SAP SuccessFactors. The company now allows employees to use the mugs and glasses previously intended for guests, which can be placed in bus bins for cleaning.

To ensure a smooth transition when making the switch, Tel Aviv-based software company MCE Systems engaged in elaborate preparations, including staff interviews, trials of various cup-washing devices and a companywide training on how to properly wash the communal mugs. It also ordered personalized cups for those concerned about hygiene and gave workers three-months' notice ahead of “D-Day”—the day the office stopped stocking disposables.

“We wanted to do it in a thoughtful and planned way so it wouldn't become a disaster,” says MCE Systems co-founder Liran Weiss. “It's a culture shift in a company, and to change culture is not an easy thing.”

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