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Furnishings and interiors can be sustainable, too

BY MARLAINE MCCAULEY

Building an environmentally sustainable world is a hot topic. Did you know that, more and more, the work place is being included as a space in which we can build a sustainable environment? Sustainability is driving us to take a closer look at the processes and materials that go into building and furnishing the work place.

You may have heard the term LEED applied to the building of environmentally friendly office spaces. Launched by the U.S. Green Building Council, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a rating system for building "green." While LEED was conceived as a voluntary program, Seattle was the first city to require that new public buildings achieve a LEED certification, in 2000. These standards have received wide acceptance, and LEED certification is desired by many office-space builders and developers.

We tend to think of LEED certifications applying to ground-up new construction or total remodels of existing buildings. LEED certifications do apply to these projects, and various levels of achievement are awarded through a point system. Points are based on standards set for sustainable sites, water efficiency, energy usage and atmosphere, materials and resources and indoor environmental quality.

What you may not realize is, LEED standards apply to a variety of spaces such as interior build-outs and furnishings. LEED-CI is a certification given to commercial interior spaces.

The Portland REI building was given the LEED-CI Gold designation for its retail space.

Puget Sound Energy's interior build-out for its new corporate headquarters on floors eight through 12 of the Summit Building in downtown Bellevue used LEED standards to set and measure green building goals. PSE wished to lower energy consumption and improve employee satisfaction with

benefits like healthier air quality and access to daylight.

As you can see, LEED standards not only apply to ground-up projects but to interior tenant improvements as well. These standards provide direction for tenants and designers who elect to use environmentally friendly materials and furnishings. LEED-CI certification validates the achievement of an interior environment that is healthy, productive and efficient.

Since 85 percent of operating costs are typically wages, investing in employee morale and well-being is money well spent. Many employers attribute lower absenteeism, higher retention and increased productivity to improved environments.

So how does the environment benefit from the choices made in furnishing an office interior?

The benefits are derived in two ways. First, the manufacturer of furnishings must meet stringent standards that include source materials (recycled content, rapidly renewable resources, certified wood) and low energy consumption in both the manufacturing and distribution of office interior products.

For example, a local manufacturer is given preference because of lower consumption of fuel in the delivery process. Some of the manufacturing materials used are surprising, such as wheat straw residue and post-consumer materials such as pop bottles.

These materials could otherwise end up in our landfills. Although recycled materials are used in the manufacturing process, the end products are new.

Second, the office environment is healthier because the furnishings are not off-gassing VOCs (volatile organic compounds).

Traditional paints, fabrics and carpeting emit fumes that are unhealthy. Manufacturers creating products that meet newer environmental standards use paints to coat metal parts and framework for desks and cubicles that do not emit VOCs.

The same is true for manufacturers' choices of fabric content for materials covering cubicle walls and choices of processes and materials for carpet production. As you can see, LEED standards are a comprehensive and innovative tool that allows us to look with fresh eyes at how we will build our future work spaces.

Here is a good thing to note: You don't need to be going after a LEED certification to use interior products that will improve your office environment. Another good thing: Environmentally friendly furnishings are priced similarly to traditional furnishings.

Some newer manufacturers only supply environmentally friendly furnishings, while other manufacturers have added product lines that minimize interior pollutants.

For a builder, the proper selection of environmentally friendly furnishings will add to the LEED point total and help reach their sought-after LEED certification.

Builders of office space find LEED certifications provide an edge in the market place, especially in our Pacific Coast states. City and county governments and larger corporate entities see LEED certification as an integral part of their social responsibility.

In redefining how we live in our buildings, architects are opening new markets by designing office environments that meet LEED standards. Many well-managed, progressive companies are looking to build and operate green work places because they understand the vital links among human health, productivity and profitability.

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