



10 Tips for Staying Waste-Free at Work

by [Mary Mazzoni](#) 08/13/12 [No Comments](#)

It's tough to keep environmental impact at a minimum while you're away from home. And when you're in a highly-regimented environment like the office, reducing waste and shrinking your footprint can seem next to impossible. But don't fret, eco-minded employee. You can easily cut office impact by making a few quick adjustments to your daily routine. Check out these 10 simple tips for staying waste-free at work, and cut the footprint of your workday in half.



Tip: Packing your own lunch not only reduces hard-to-recycle waste like foam clamshells and single-use food boxes, but can also help you save thousands of dollars each year. Photo: Shutterstock

1. Pack your own lunch

Bringing your own lunch and snacks to the office in reusable containers not only reduces packaging waste, but can also put thousands of dollars back into your pocket annually.

A [survey](#) of 1,000 workers conducted by finance recruiting firm [Accounting Principals](#) revealed that the average American worker spends \$37 per week on bought lunch, adding up to \$2,000 a year (there's that pay increase you've been looking for).

The same survey found that 50 percent of the American workforce spends [\\$1,000 per year](#) on coffee. So, bring your morning cup to work in a reusable mug, and utilize office coffee machines to save on cash and reduce hard-to-recycle coffee cup waste.

To get you started on your low-waste, low-budget revolution, check out these sustainable [lunch](#) and [snack](#) recipes that are perfect for the office, and banish those vending machine trips for good.



Tip: Adjusting the way you use and store your office supplies can actually make them last longer, reducing both waste and workday frustration. Photo: Shutterstock

2. Make supplies last longer

Reaching for a dried-out pen during a stressful workday can make you want to pull your hair out. But it can also lead to prematurely tossing your supplies. Are there really ways to make office supplies last longer? Absolutely.

The ink in your pens, highlighters and markers tends to dry up faster if they aren't being used regularly. So, try using your writing implements one-at-a-time to ensure they won't end up forgotten in the back of your desk.

And try to keep your pen tips clean. Inks naturally coagulate at the tip of your pen, making them trickier to write with over time. To avoid plastic waste (and frustration), wipe the tip of your pen with a cloth after each use, and store pens with tips pointing upward to prevent clogging.

Also, keep all pens, markers and glue sticks in a cool, dry place – like inside a desk drawer or closet. Heat and exposure to direct sunlight can cause inks and glues to dry up and harden.



Tip: Choose office supplies that are easy to reuse or recycle to reduce waste. Photo: Shutterstock

3. “Precycle” your office supplies

[“Precycling”](#) refers to the simple act of reducing non-recyclable waste before it starts. The term typically applies to choosing products packaged in materials that are easily recyclable, but it can also apply to your office supplies.

Opt for supplies that are easy to reuse or recycle to stop waste in its tracks. When faced with a decision as to which supplies to use, try asking yourself: Can I recycle or reuse this? A simple change in mindset could mean lighter waste bins all year long.

Not sure where to start? Try using paper clips instead of staples for easy reuse, and opt for crumpled newspaper instead of bubble wrap to protect items during shipping. At your desk, invest in a reusable tape dispenser to halt plastic dispenser waste, and reuse items like folders and media boxes for as long as possible before throwing them out.



Tip: If your office is too far away for you to walk or bike, try carpooling with coworkers to shrink eco impact. Photo: Carpooling.com

4. Green your commute

Commuting to work can be stressful – not only for you, but also for the environment. The average American family’s weekday commute produces around 7,000 pounds of carbon emissions every year, according to a [study](#) conducted by the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#).

The good news is that reducing your driving, even slightly, can carry huge environmental benefits. Driving a mere 10 percent less, by walking, cycling, carpooling, or taking public transit, can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 440 to 1,763 pounds per year depending on the vehicle, according to the nonprofit ecology group [Biosphere Institute of the Bow Valley](#).

If you’re lucky enough to live close to your workplace, try walking or biking to shrink your carbon footprint, or opt for public transportation for a low-waste, low-stress commute.

If your office is on the other side of town, try carpooling with coworkers a few times a week to reduce environmental impact. Carpooling with two other passengers creates a mere 0.05 pounds of carbon emissions per person, per mile – even in an average car getting about 23 miles-per-gallon, according to [Sightline Institute](#). A “vanpool,” with six occupants in total, comes in at less than 0.04 pounds of CO₂ per mile, [the research group found](#).

As an added bonus, carpoolings is also a great way to bond with your coworkers and form relationships you may not have had otherwise. So, round up the gang and hop in the car for a commute that's low-waste *and* fun.



Tip: Use technical tools to reduce your use of paper. Photo: Shutterstock

5. Reduce paper use

The average office worker in the U.S. uses [10,000 sheets](#) of copy paper each year. That's 4 million tons of copy paper used annually – leaving plenty of room to reduce paper use and shrink your office footprint.

Avoid using paper by emailing important documents to coworkers and clients, and using presentations rather than handouts at weekly staff meetings. To further reduce paper consumption, only print documents when you absolutely have to, and try to use both sides of the paper whenever possible.

For paper you do use, always remember to recycle. The EPA [estimates](#) that if an office building of 7,000 workers recycled all of its paper for a year, it would amount to taking 400 cars off the road.



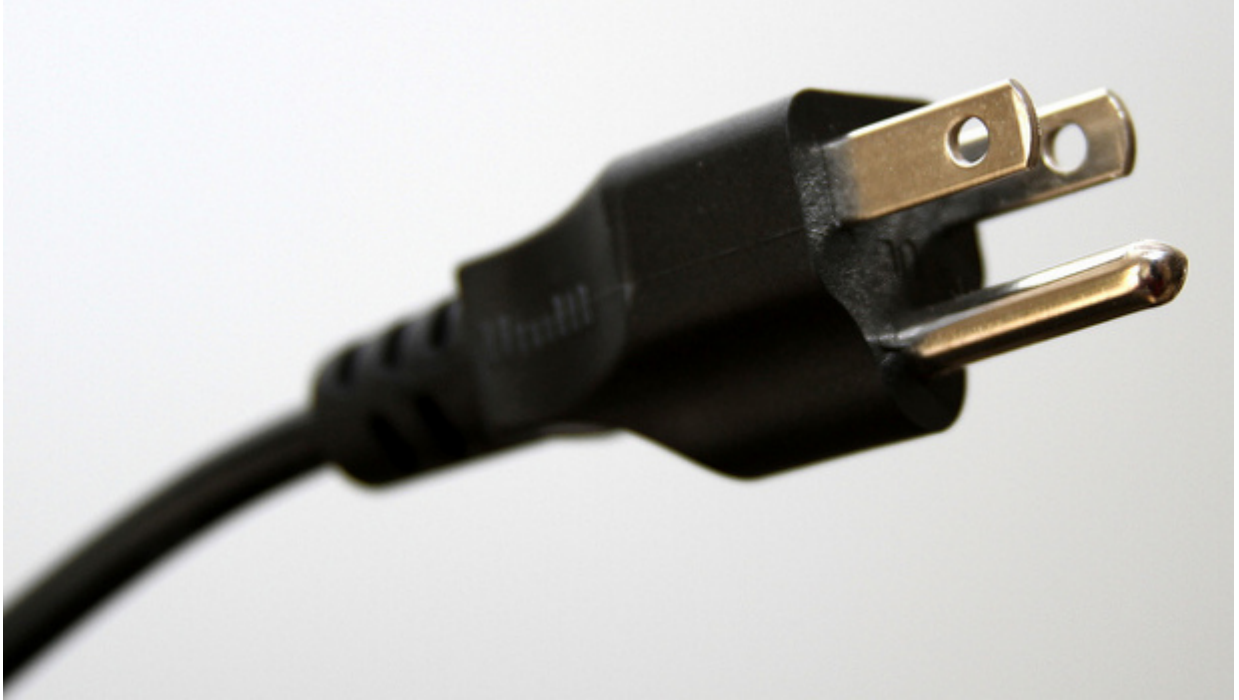
Tip: Keep a disposable-free survival kit in your desk to banish single-use products from your workday. Photo: Shutterstock

6. Be ready with reusable

From impromptu lunch outings and office birthday parties to lunch-break errands and shopping trips, there are loads of opportunities to get stuck with single-use products during your workday.

Reduce the disposable plates, cups, silverware and shopping bags you contribute to our waste stream by being prepared with reusable alternatives ahead of time.

Keep a disposable-free survival kit, including reusable coffee mugs, water bottles, dishware and shopping bags, at your desk to help you reduce waste before it starts.



Tip: Unplug your computer and other office electronics when not in use to reduce vampire power. Photo: Flickr/[Samuel M. Livingston](#)

7. Shrink your energy footprint

Computers, printers and other office necessities can use up loads of energy, racking up enormous bills and expanding the footprint of your workplace. While office energy use may seem nearly impossible to avoid, you can dramatically cut down on your kilowatt-hours with a few easy steps.

If you work from home, put all of your electronics on a power strip, and flip the switch off when items are not in use to avoid [vampire power](#). And take a moment to adjust your computer's settings to optimize battery usage and hibernate after a period of inactivity.

If you work in an office, talk to your supervisors and IT department about adjusting the settings on all of your office computers and installing power strips. Your bosses will likely be receptive when you tell them how much money it could save.



Tip: Ditch the pen and paper, and use apps and an old-fashioned white board for notes instead.
Photo: Flickr/[bark](#)

8. Take paperless notes

Taking notes is a natural way to get the creative juices flowing. But why take notes on paper when waste-free alternatives abound?

Most word processing software includes an easy highlighter tool to mark important sections of your notes. But if you're going to take e-notes, you might as well opt for a program that can multi-task. Try an online note-taking program (like [Evernote](#) or [UberNote](#)) that allows you to bookmark sites of interest, jot down ideas and collaborate with multiple users.

And ditch the endless stream of adhesive paper notes by downloading a free app like [Sticky Notes](#) for your computer or the official [Post-It app](#) for your smartphone.

If you're still craving the pen and paper, invest in a whiteboard or chalkboard for your desk, so you can jot down notes and erase them at your leisure without the waste.



Tip: When shipping, pack boxes densely, and reuse them whenever possible to reduce waste.
Photo: Shutterstock

9. Cut back on packing waste

Packing and shipping can create loads of office waste, but you can still do your part to keep those trash cans empty. When shipping, try to pack boxes as densely as possible to avoid cardboard waste, and reuse the same boxes when you can.

For boxes that can't be reused: compost them! If you work in an office building or don't have a compost pile for your home office waste, many farmers accept compostables for use in fertilizing their crops. Talk to a local composter about starting a partnership with your office and sending all of your boxes there.

When transporting office supplies from one office to another, ditch the cardboard boxes in favor of a reusable solution like [Rent-a-Green Box](#). Featured on [Earth911 in 2010](#), this “zero-waste pack and move solution” rents out reusable, recycled-content containers for a fraction of the cost (and waste) associated with cardboard moving boxes.



Tip: Politely sharing your eco-minded values with coworkers is a great way to get everyone in your office excited about going green. Photo: Flickr/[Victor1558](#)

10. Help give coworkers the green bug

Sharing eco-minded ideas with coworkers is a great way to make sure your whole office gets in on the waste-reducing action.

Try giving out reusable water bottles, coffee mugs and shopping bags at the office on holidays to encourage fellow employees to reduce waste. Or send out a mass email about useful file-sharing tools provided by your workplace to remind coworkers of alternatives to printing.

When discussing your values with coworkers, remember to frame the conversation as providing information, not dissing their habits. For example, if you notice a coworker tossing a plastic bottle in the trash, politely telling him about a recycling bin in the next room will yield far better results than berating him about his disposal habits. With the right approach, you can get everyone in your office excited about going green.

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