



Vancouver's green legal shift

Law has always been a tool for providing co-existence, so it seems only natural that law firms should adopt principles of sustainability. The latest Vancouver legal office to undergo an environmental audit is Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. The office struck an environmental responsibility committee or, as chairman and partner Magnus Verbrugge calls it, "the green team," which now networks with similar BLG office committees across the country.

Verbrugge's interest in the environment began four years ago, when he started a family. He took an interest in home products but also how our lifestyle impacts the environmental legacy for his children. He shopped at places such as Green Works, which supplies green building materials. While his home life was greening up, he realized the same was not true at work. "We were part of one of the largest firms in Canada and we were not doing anything on this front," he says. A workgroup began tossing around ideas on how sustainability could be tackled, a presentation was made to the office's management committee, and it "gave us the green light."



Magnus Verbrugge

BLG hired Green Workplace, which helps businesses track and reduce their consumption of resources, ranging from paper, cutlery, and energy through to supplier goods and even harmful cleaning products. Verbrugge says the audit took about three weeks as several Green Workplace consultants visited the office to watch staff work and to ask questions. "They put together a sophisticated report that was practical and showed what specific changes could be made to reduce our footprint and also how it impacted our spending," he says.

The report found the office consumed paper annually from approximately 1,000 trees. "It was not just the number of trees cut down but the chemicals used in the process of making paper and this impact on the eco-system," he says. Practical solutions include double-sided printing or going to more paperless files, which yield savings in labour, storage, and transportation costs. Even small changes such as a low-flow \$150 tap can reduce water waste substantially in the kitchen area.

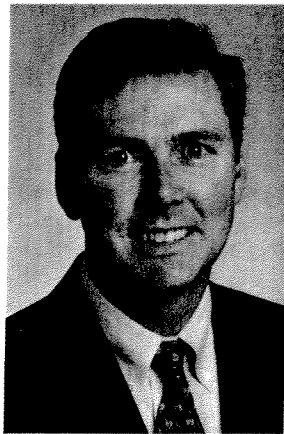
While BLG is in the evaluative stage now with the report, Verbrugge says several firms in Vancouver, such as Alexander Holburn Beaudin & Lang LLP, are further along. AHBL partner Andrew MacKay says its initiative began about three years ago because of volunteer work with environmentally conscious community organizations such as the David Suzuki Foundation. Such work caused the firm to look internally. "That kind

of spurred us along," he says. Two years into the program, it remains popular with staff, he notes.

However, MacKay says a successful change means involving those who will be affected the most in the decision making. "We put together committees with representatives that were lawyers, office staff, associates, partners, and legal assistants," he says. This established a process for bringing forward ideas from throughout the firm. Some decisions were also left to those directly impacted, such as moving from paper plate products to porcelain. "That isn't really for lawyers to decide," he says, "as it's the catering staff that will be impacted."

Moving to a socially responsible workplace has also proven to be good business. A growing number of clients now actively seek out service providers who have comprehensive in-house sustainability policies, says MacKay.

While cost savings can be achieved, he says AHBL has taken a cost-neutral position. "What we save in one area, we spend in another," MacKay says, as some products — like fair-trade coffee — can be more expensive. AHBL also reduced the coffee amount dispensed to compensate. "No one seemed to notice."



Andrew MacKay

Also, the firm e-mailed Christmas cards last year. "We saved on the mailing but we spent more on creating a better electronic product," he says.

Having sustainability policies can also be fun. Many of the staff and lawyers cycle to work, as the company provides a bike locker. As a corporate team, AHBL has participated in community cycle challenges aimed at reducing driving. Plus, there's the opportunity to challenge other law firms.

BLG's regional managing partner Deborah Overholt says she was "surprised" by the number of opportunities to make changes and also pleased that the report by Green Workplace provides choices. For example, while plastic disposable items can be replaced by reusable items, what if there is a need to use disposal? The report, she points out, provides biodegradable alternatives. Such choices mean change is easier, she says. "It is my expectation that we will be making a number of changes and management is very supportive of this."

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