

Green teams: Silicon Valley employees use peer pressure, creative ideas to help the environment

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Yahoo and LJ Engineering & Manufacturing couldn't be more different. One is a global Internet giant; the other a small machine shop in Santa Clara.

Yet both reflect a growing trend in Silicon Valley: On their own, employees at each company have formed green teams. These groups of volunteers gather to push their peers and employers to become more environmentally aware. They encourage recycling; advocate for carpooling, mass transit and bikes; and generally seek to cut carbon emissions. Sixty green teams exist locally, and more are forming, according to Sustainable Silicon Valley, a local environmental collaborative.

On a recent Thursday, for example, Yahoo's green team held a "Chuck the Cup" day, handing out mugs and cookies at its Sunnyvale campus to get people to stop using paper cups.

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While companies add solar-panel systems on roofs and talk about becoming carbon-neutral, green teams independently promote awareness of what fellow employees can do — at work and at home. They seek to foster, not force, change. In the end, they believe, little things add up to big results.

Team results are notable:

At eBay, the green team started with 50 people at a pizza lunch in May 2007. It now has more than 1,200 members at 10 locations, including a new group in India. They count a Funky Mug contest in Salt Lake City and a Chili-Palooza in Vancouver — both efforts to get people to reuse cups, dishes and utensils rather than using and discarding Styrofoam, paper and plastic — as major accomplishments.

At Yahoo, where the green team numbers 300, they've held green lectures, screened green movies and redesigned recycling bins to make them more attractive, larger and easier to use. The team was instrumental in convincing Yahoo to set all of its copy machines on two-sided printing mode, resulting in a drop in paper consumption from 1.6 million to 750,000 sheets a month.

At LJ Engineering, a 13-member green team just formed in May. It's small, but it's got big goals, such as getting customers to return packaging, using recycled paper for business cards and stationery and doing business with other green companies.

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Don Bray, with AltaTerra Research, says their voluntary nature makes green teams much different than typical company-organized task forces. Members don't function related to the status of their jobs within the organization. They're supportive, not competitive or political.

"Team members have a shared identity, a common purpose and a sense of empowerment to jointly create and deploy innovations that will improve the environmental performance of the business and the community at large," Bray wrote in a research note earlier this year. In fact, he added, green teams represent a new organizational model that might be used to deal with other corporate priorities.

Rick Row, executive director of the non-profit Sustainable Silicon Valley, whose corporate and governmental members push for a regionwide reduction in carbon emissions, agrees with Bray's findings.

"What seems to be different in Silicon Valley is that many of the green teams I've encountered seem to be started out of the environmental passion of some of the employees themselves to make a difference, and they reach up to their managements to work with them," Row said.

By day, for example, Kate Gerwe is Yahoo's senior director of marketing. Yet she's often better known as the head of the green team at the company's Sunnyvale campus.

"I got passionate about this when I had kids," she said. "I want them to see glaciers some day."

At Yahoo, the green team sees its mission as two-fold: encouraging actions and increasing awareness through education. To win a green coffee mug at Chuck the Cup, for instance, Yahoo employees had to answer trivia questions about green topics.

To Chris Page, Yahoo's director of climate and energy strategy, the volunteer green team is a crucial element of what she's trying to do at the company. While Page works to "measure, manage and mitigate" Yahoo's carbon footprint, the team handles education and stages events, "which myself as a single individual couldn't do if I had all the time in the world."

Yahoo has been public about its green leanings — the company announced it had become carbon-neutral late in 2007 — but LJ Engineering & Manufacturing operates in a different world, making precision metal parts for the semiconductor industry.

Still, it can now boast of becoming a Bay Area Green Business certified company. The certification program, conducted through the Association of Bay Area Governments, awards its seal to companies that follow conservation and waste-reduction practices. About 1,475 businesses in the nine-county Bay Area have been certified so far.

LJ Engineering, which employs 120 people, has acted on its green pledge, putting in place more efficient lights and a solar-panel system, and buying two Prius hybrids to shuttle parts and employees to and from the train station.

LJ owner Mark Stout also has hired Peggy Lord as the company's sustainability coordinator. Pushing to become green, they note, isn't just about being a good corporate citizen. It also saves money and adds an advantage as more customers seek green suppliers.

But it's Jean Cooley, an administrative assistant at LJ, who heads the green team, internally known as the Pollution Solution Group. She's purposely quirky to capture people's attention. The monthly green team meeting starts at 10:37 a.m., for instance. Posters

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promoting recycling and even her e-mail signature refer to her as Jean Green Cooley.

Cooley doesn't hesitate to scold people when they don't recycle, or don't do it properly. She has held a green contest (a four-question quiz), for which the company donated prize money and green T-shirts. The next contest will have questions translated into the native language of LJ's employees, including Spanish and Vietnamese.

So far, the company has taken care of "the low-hanging fruit," Lord said. Next up are more difficult challenges, such as reusing paper and plastic packaging materials, and buying toilet paper and garbage bags that come from recycled materials.

Even at LJ Engineering, every little bit helps.

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GREEN TEAM SCHEMES

Here's what green teams at a few Silicon Valley companies have done recently to promote conservation, energy efficiency and better green practices.

Yahoo: On Chuck the Cup Day, the green team distributed 1,500 green ceramic mugs at Yahoo's Sunnyvale and Burbank campuses to discourage people from using and discarding paper coffee cups. In Burbank, the green team arranged for a mobile food vendor who only sells organic food to come to campus.

LJ Engineering & Manufacturing, Santa Clara: The company has banned Windex, now uses rechargeable batteries, and has purchased extra recycling bins.

eBay: The green team boasts more than 1,000 members. In Salt Lake City, where more than 10 percent of workers are on the green team, eBay has set aside preferred parking for fuel-efficient

vehicles, held a funky mug contest to promote the use of reusable drink containers and started a green newsletter that's distributed to all employees.

EMeter, San Mateo: The green team conducted a transportation survey to measure the carbon impact of employees commuting and business travel, and to identify barriers to employees using mass transit or carpooling.

Sources: Yahoo; LJ Engineering & Manufacturing; eBay; eMeter

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