Recycling in the workplace: insights from psychology

by Professor Dean Bartlett

Businesses in the UK produce millions of tonnes of waste every year, with around 200,000 tonnes coming from the City of London alone[1]. One of the main ways of reducing the amount going into landfill is by recycling,

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which normally involves separating waste at source. This approach (i.e. using different bins for different types of waste) dramatically increases the proportion of waste that can be recycled, however it depends upon individuals using the facilities and using them correctly (i.e. putting the right thing in the correct bin). Research tells us that this isn't always quite as straight-forward as it seems and, based on insights from the field of work and organisational psychology, businesses can take steps to help their employees improve levels of recycling and other 'green' behaviours at work.

One approach, derived from what is popularly termed 'behavioural economics' (which is merely the application of the psychology of decision-making to economic decisions) is known as 'nudging', after the popular book by Yale academics Thaler and Sunstein[2]. It can be thought of as the 'behavioural design' of systems and objects (such as recycling bins) that aim to promote, initiate and sustain certain types of behaviour or behavioural change. However, the range of psychological and other approaches that can be used to encourage greener behaviour in the workplace is much wider than this. In a report[3] which I edited for the British Psychological Society entitled 'Going Green: the psychology of sustainability in the workplace', the range of activities that were being undertaken by businesses varied from recycling of materials (the most common single intervention), through to the introduction of various 'green technologies' (often aimed at reducing power consumption) and 'carbon offsetting' (the least common approach).

Compliance

Although the vast majority of businesses do recycle, its success depends upon individual compliance. While 'nudging' individuals to recycle through the use of well-designed facilities can help, the general consensus is that it is only when businesses promote an entire 'culture' of pro-environmental behaviour that efforts to encourage recycling really start to pay off. This is because even when individuals are keen to recycle, they don't always do so – numerous studies have shown that even for those individuals who display high levels of recycling behaviour at home, this does not translate to the workplace, where levels of recycling behaviour are generally lower.

Individuals can also have problems in using green technologies that businesses may introduce to help them become more environmentally friendly. Examples include complicated or ambiguous controls and user-interfaces, lack of feedback about what particular switches or buttons do or missing, complicated or meaningless instructions or labels. Again, this can arise from a failure to think through how individuals as 'end-users' of such technology actually behave in real life and there are numerous ways in which people adapt to and, on occasion even sabotage, such technology in order to suit their own individual needs. Technology needs to account for the role of end-user behaviour in its design if it is to be effective and insights from work-design and ergonomics can be used to model this influence and 'design-in' the best shape or form of device and meaningful, user-friendly interfaces.

Values

In addition to accounting for how 'green' behaviour such as recycling is initiated and maintained and adopting greener energy-saving office equipment, organisations can move to the next level by taking into consideration how green attitudes and values can be incorporated into the design of employee selection, reward and performance management systems. A wide number of theoretical ideas, research findings and useful theories of behaviour change and maintenance, including approaches which aim to increase and harness levels of individual motivation, have been proposed drawing upon the psychology of motivation and employee engagement.

However, these also suggest that, even when businesses attempt the most well-intentioned of interventions, conceived and implemented in the best possible ways and using the best technology, they are still likely to fail to achieve their desired effect unless we take seriously the people issues which lie at the heart of the 'sustainability solution'. While opinions differ regarding the desirability and influence of innovative technological solutions and the respective roles of business vis-a-vis governments and other institutions, the fact is that becoming more sustainable comes down to the behaviour of individuals in the final analysis. I have argued elsewhere[4] that business leaders of the future will be a driving force in the 'sustainability revolution', but we all have a part to play and the efforts of any business will ultimately be enacted through the people that work within it.

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LBM fact: One in three London workers has a university degree
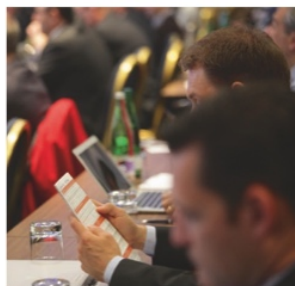
The need for speed

by Anthony Impey

What's the first thing you do when you arrive at a conference about WiFi? Test the speed of the internet, of course. So when I attended the WiFi Global Congress in London earlier this year, I did just that. And the results weren't bad. Considering the hall in a hotel next to Tower Bridge was packed with delegates, the speed was running at a respectable 44Mb download and 32 upload (although not quite the 160Mb speed I clocked at the Digital Shoreditch gathering a few weeks earlier).

And this is important, because never before has the speed of the internet been more critical for London's businesses. The news is full of stories about the plight of companies that struggle to run their businesses with sluggish broadband speeds. London's *Evening Standard* recently reported that a company called Proudfoot, located a short hop from the tech cluster around 'Silicon Roundabout', found that it was faster to send electronic files by push-bike then it was to use their broadband. Other companies have waited for months and months for ultra-fast fibre optics to be installed. Mixcloud, a company which operates a platform for radio broadcasters, was waiting nearly six months before abandoning their order for fibre.

Priority

The severity of the problem has made it a political priority. May-or Boris Johnson has introduced a broadband rating system for buildings in London, which will provide information about the performance of the connectivity in individual commercial buildings. Meanwhile, George Osborne has said that fast broadband is a basic legal right, and promised 100Mb broadband speeds nationwide.

Unsurprisingly, it was a central topic of discussion amongst the tech leaders who gathered for the Wifi Global Congress. In the words of JR Wilson, chairman of the Wireless Broadband Alliance, the organisers of the event, "we are undergoing a technology transformation." This transformation requires universal high-speed connectivity, as the amount of data we consume sky-rockets, the need for instant access information has become a crucial way business operates and the development of smart cities exponentially increases the number of devices connected to the internet.

Speaking at the conference, Colin Stanbridge, LCCI chief executive, said that ultrafast connectivity was a top priority for London's businesses and that the current state of the broadband infrastructure threatened the capital's status as the number one city in the world. He also flagged a lax approach to the cyber security and that there was evidence that small businesses in particular lacked the information to mitigate this risk.

Other speakers talked about projects where broadband connectivity supercharged the development of the local economy. Gavin Poole, chief executive of Here East, operator of a giant development at the former media centre on the Olympic Park, described how they brought ultrafast broadband to neighbouring business using fixed-wireless technology.

Chris Hewertson from Guoman Hotels who were hosting the conference (and who's broadband speed had performed so well when I tested it), told how free-of-charge, high-speed, high-performance WiFi was an essential component to every guest's stay. He said that internet access was a utility that was as essential as electricity.

Challenges

The other theme was how WiFi in public spaces has gone from a pay-for-service to a freemium business model, where connectivity is supplied at no cost, frequently in exchange for capturing information about the user. For the operator of the WiFi service, this provides valuable information about users, especially when linked to social media data secured during the log-in process. However, as flagged by Chris Annetts, director of commercial passenger services at Heathrow Airport, people do not always want to share data about themselves. This is likely to create commercial challenges in the future.

As the conference drew to an end, I felt it was only right to test the broadband speed again. With 50Mb download and 36Mb upload it was still holding strong. In fact, this outstripped the speed that many of London's businesses have to contend with day-to-day! This is just another indication that it's time to fix London's broadband.

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