



# Breaking the Barriers To Workplace Recycling

## Introduction

Australian workplaces generate over 12.5 million tonnes of waste each year. 44% of this waste is being sent to landfill<sup>1</sup>. Another way to think of this is that every Australian worker generates 1.7 tonnes of waste a year.

There is clearly a need for workplaces to establish recycling systems for their waste. However, despite the best of intentions, workplace recycling programs sometimes struggle to get off the ground or meet their targets.

This resource highlights the five biggest barriers to workplace recycling and strategies for breaking those barriers down.

## 1: Insufficient Support from Management

In a study in the UK nine out of ten respondents stated that management level support was essential for a successful recycling program<sup>2</sup>. The involvement of managers helps change attitudes, increase awareness and motivate participation<sup>3</sup>.

In Australia four out of ten people feel that their managers are not supporting and leading pro-environmental behaviour in the workplace<sup>2</sup>. In small to medium workplaces the influence of managers, either positive or negative, can be felt on a daily basis while in larger workplaces it can be difficult to get initiatives on the agenda without senior level support.



## Breaking The Barrier

Start small. Sign on to free, producer responsibility programs like **'Cartridges 4 Planet Ark'** for your toner and inkjet waste or **MobileMuster** for old phones. These programs will lift the profile of recycling without costing the organisation anything.

Make a business case for recycling. Do some research into the cost of waste management – what are you currently paying and where can saving be made? If you are paying for the collection of un-compacted plastic wrap and cardboard you are basically paying for air to be removed from your premises. Make the case that managing waste better, including recycling, can help save costs.

Mitchell Bros 4X4 in Northern Sydney used the **Bin Trim** program to review their waste management. They found that one item, plastic bumpers, made up 80% of the material being sent to landfill. By finding a recycler for this material they were able to reduce waste collections from once a week to once a month. In turn they are paying \$1,500 less in fees a year.

*"We've already had a couple of hard plastics collections and the team know exactly what they've gotta do and it's really saving us a heap of time, money and resources."*

Aaron Mitchell, Mitchell Bros 4X4.

## 2: Staff Training

For recycling to become a habit, as it is in most Australian homes, everyone needs to know exactly what to do. Insufficient training results in confusion, which has a number of potential outcomes including active recyclers becoming disheartened and non-recyclers avoiding the program or becoming openly hostile.

Workplaces with large numbers of casual employees or high turnover often have lower recycling rates, as it is particularly difficult to implement proper training<sup>7</sup>.

### Breaking the Barrier

When establishing a new program ensure that you factor in a staff training element. It should include clear information about what the program aims to achieve, why it's being undertaken and, most important of all, exactly what is expected of each staff member. Training is an essential part of any recycling program, so make sure you include it in the early planning stages. If you are using an external contractor, ask if they have training resources you can use or whether they can facilitate the training as part of their service.

Build in training strategies for new staff as they join the organisation. Including recycling in induction sessions, information packs or mentor programs are positive ways to ensure new staff are clear about their responsibilities.

Refoil, a small business manufacturer and supplier of recycled aluminium foil to hair salons uses posters, stickers and brochures to educate salon staff on how to recycle foil correctly.

*“If you make it a policy and educate your staff then eventually these activities will become second nature to everyone. And you might be surprised of what other environmentally sustainable work practices your staff will initiate after.”*

Ewelina Soroko, Co-founder of Refoil



Foil collected for recycling.



## 3: Staff Motivation

The costs of waste management are often hidden and most staff don't have any direct investment in reducing those costs.

When a new recycling program is rolled out employees may simply be told to recycle, without an understanding of the benefits to the environment or to the business. This can encourage staff to look at the new program as an imposition and to feel disengaged from it.<sup>11</sup> They are especially likely to react against a program if it involves changes to their usual activities.

### Breaking the Barrier

It's important that staff understand both how and why they are being asked to recycle. Providing this information has been shown to motivate employees and increase participation.<sup>10,11</sup> Additionally, providing feedback on achievements and successes further reinforces the positive behaviour and makes recycling a feel good activity.

Empowering staff to contribute to the program through suggestion schemes, problem solving groups and identifying the 'recycling champions' helps to increase employee participation and promote teamwork.<sup>6</sup>





Hepburn Health Service, Victoria



Provide specific feedback including total amounts recycled and cost savings and make feedback sessions a part of regular communications. This might mean providing information or feedback as part of regular staff meetings or electronic communications like newsletters or the intranet.

Following the implementation of recycling services across four sites Hepburn Health Service (HHS) in Victoria developed a communications plan to ensure full staff participation. An Environmental Management Committee was established with representatives from all four sites who developed regular newsletters, educational emails and other resources that were sent to all staff. These communications included instructions on the systems as well as positive feedback.

#### 4: Location of the Bins

The location of recycling bins has a significant influence on recycling rates and contamination levels. It's common sense that the more inconvenient it is to recycle, the less importance it has to workers<sup>12</sup>. In a study where a single paper recycling bin was placed in the utility room of a large office, less than one third of paper was recycled (28%). However, when individual recycling trays were placed on each desk, nearly all waste paper (94%) was recycled.<sup>13</sup>

The distance between general waste bins and recycling bins also influences recycling behaviour. The closer the recycling bin is to the general waste (or landfill) bin the more people will recycle. If the

recycling bin is more than five metres from the waste bin the recycling rate will be almost the same as if no recycling bin is provided at all<sup>8</sup>.

#### Breaking the Barrier

Locate recycling facilities in areas that will maximise participation. For items like food and drink packaging and paper, locate a recycling bin next to every general waste bin to ensure that staff always have the option to recycle<sup>9</sup>.

Place the 'Cartridges 4 Planet Ark' box and the paper recycling bin next to the printer or photocopier. On-desk paper trays or under desk bins are also a great way to capture paper for recycling.

Some materials need to be separated at their source for the best recycling outcomes. Material like oils or chemicals become contaminated when mixed together, which prevents them being recycled. For these materials set up collection stations that are easily accessed at the point of collection and are clearly marked.

Best Employment, an employment service in regional NSW used Bin Trim to calculate their waste streams. They then rolled out recycling facilities across all their offices. Recycling bins were strategically placed near photocopiers and drink machines. These changes resulted in a 25% increase in recycling. As the program coordinator said

*"...small changes in behaviour can have large impacts in reducing waste."*

Roger Abbot, Quality and Projects Coordinator



Best Employment increased recycling by 25% by placing bins in areas of need.



## 5: Recycling Signage

Unclear or absent signage causes confusion and leads to lower participation. Research has shown that a lack of awareness of recycling facilities is, pretty obviously, a significant reason for not recycling<sup>14</sup>.

The design and wording of signs can also influence behaviour. Studies have shown that some people find recycling signs confusing. Using fewer words and more pictures helps reduce this confusion<sup>15</sup>. Participants in one study interpreted a sign promoting recycling by using the statement 'Please recycle... It is important' as pushy and too vague. Inserting validation into the statement however, 'Please recycle... It may be inconvenient, but it is important', was an effective way to reduce defensiveness and reactance. Recycling rates increased simply by acknowledging that recycling could be inconvenient.<sup>16</sup>

### Breaking the Barrier

The BusinessRecycling site [outlines a few golden rules](#) for setting up signage to encourage appropriate behaviour. Those rules are:

- Make it noticeable – Use eye catching images and colours and once it's been on display for a while move it around to prevent sign-blindness.
- Make it self-explanatory – Telling people exactly what's required of them will be more effective than being smart, bossy or funny.
- Put it as close to the action as possible – Put the signage on or above the recycling bin.
- Make it positive – Being told not to do something can make people feel resentful. Wherever possible, frame signs in the positive and thank people for participating.

When DB Schenker Global Freight Forwarders, introduced mobile phone and battery recycling they used the [BusinessRecycling website](#) to find clear and easy to understand signage.

*"I was able to find a variety of resources and posters on the site. It was clear for our staff to see the new recycling initiative and see how to use it."*

John Turle, DB Schenker

## More Information and Resources

### BusinessRecycling Information Service

Make recycling at work easy! The [BusinessRecycling.com.au](#) website and hotline (1300 763 768) have reuse and recycling options listed for around 90 different materials. The site also has resources to help you choose the right recycler, free signage and case studies showing how others manage their waste and recycling programs.

### Bin Trim

[Bin Trim](#) is an Excel tool, developed by the NSW Environment Protection Authority, that helps you measure your business waste and gives you tailored information to reduce, reuse and recycle materials. It is a quick and easy tool that will provide your workplace with:

- a profile of your current waste and recycling
- a tailored Bin Trim plan to reduce, reuse and recycle
- practical information to help you waste less and save more.

## References

[businessrecycling.com.au](#)



Major Partner



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Promotion Partner

