

Sustainability needs you

Every manufacturer that produces a 'green' product wants to demonstrate its credentials to the end-user. Whether it is made from recycled material, can be recycled or is produced using carefully chosen materials that do not damage the environment, this has to be communicated in some way.

This need is based on market developments and legislative requirements. However, the current landscape provides no clear guidance to help customers and end-users to buy 'green' office products. The most important element of standards is the transparency they can provide about the full product lifecycle and across the supply chain, supported by all stakeholders, but this is not currently possible.

In response to this lack of guidance, the Sustainable Office project was launched in 2010 and is already making headway.

The situation today

When using Google to search for 'eco-labels' more than three million webpages are revealed that all try to explain one or more eco-labels. When digging into the details of each page, which isn't something that an average customer will do, approximately 150 eco-labels are uncovered that can be applied to office products.

Across Europe a wide range of labels represents regional third-party independent verified labels, such as FSC, PEFC and Blue Angel, and local labels, such as NF environment or Milieukeur, all the way through to specific manufacturer or reseller 'green' product identifiers. Each individual identifier addresses various elements of the environmental or sustainable impact of a product's lifecycle. As such this means that comparing apples with apples is impossible unless decision makers or buyers ask for additional information that goes beyond the average definition of eco-labels.

Resellers and manufacturers have implemented different approaches when addressing 'green' product credentials. These vary from independent third-party verification to apply for an eco-label or international standards (such as ISO 14021, ISO 14024 or ISO 14025). Another technique is to create self-declarations without any trace of validation. This often results in 'greenwashing', which means an environmental product claim is unsubstantiated, misleading or irrelevant (for example used as a distraction). A good example is the claim 'environmental friendly,' which doesn't add anything if not properly explained why, and compared to what.

Since 2004 the European Commission has been promoting the benefits of green public procurement (GPP) when, for example, integrating environmental considerations into a tender's technical

The Sustainable Office project is an ambitious roadmap that aims to standardise environmental accreditation across the European, and in the future global, office products industry. One of the project's initiators details its potential

by Marcel Jacobs



SustainableOffice



specifications, selection and award criteria and contract performance clauses. In a few European countries including the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands this has been recognised and has resulted in stakeholder engagement. The development of GPP criteria requires a long-term effort in combination with openness of participants in the dialogue and willingness to drive innovation. Lessons learned include the fact that governmental body attitudes are changing from the directive towards the proactive engagement of stakeholders.

However, end-users are increasingly affected by this lack of clarity. The majority of 'green' procurement is a tick-in-the-box process that doesn't mean the buyer has bought an environmentally preferable product. Also, buyers continuously ask for lower or better pricing which, when combined with the price erosions of office products, doesn't put emphasis on manufacturers developing green products or resellers selling these. Green procurement goes beyond buying a green product, even when taking into account that there is no single definition of a green product. It means that the choice of an end-user does have the potential to reduce the environmental impact of a product that, in almost all cases, is correlated to cost efficiency and effectiveness over the total product lifecycle.

In the OP industry, more and more manufacturers are offering products, or even a full assortment, that meet 'green' criteria. The demand for more environmental information related to the supply chain and carbon footprint is increasing almost daily.

Until now the industry hasn't been recognised for the environment protection efforts that are already in place, whether related to the environmental production of paper, for example, or the increase in using recycled material. The question that now arises is, did we miss an opportunity as industry? The answer is partly 'yes', because it will take some time to align the OP industry to join forces and really become 'one for all, all for one'.

The project

In short, the Sustainable Office project is an industry-wide initiative to develop one common approach to using 'green' product ratings in combination with one single identifier. It aims to raise awareness that the current eco-label landscape doesn't enable a proper environmental choice.

Next, the project will address the aim to increase transparency and provide guidance

to help consumers make the right choice. As it is based on proactive stakeholder engagement it will enable stakeholders to participate, such as producers, resellers, distributors, trade associations, governmental bodies, non-governmental organisations and customer associations.

When fully rolled out, the project will not only create a level playing field from an environmental perspective; it will enable true sustainable innovators to be able to differentiate products in a transparent manner when customers or end-users want to make a 'green' procurement decision. As such, it will drive sustainable product and supply chain innovations.

The approach works by means of a phased approach (see box 'Phased approach' on page 16). We want to continuously improve the standard while at the same time ensuring that the gap between frontrunners and others is not getting too big. We need to not only close the gap within our own industry but at the same time manage customer perceptions and raise awareness.

The rating of each individual product within the Sustainable Office labels scheme depends on the following elements where sustainability is, or will be, addressed:

- Company strategy, policy and ambitions
- Supply chain capabilities
- Product development
- Marketing mix and product proposition
- Total cost or value-based thinking.

The Sustainable Office label will ultimately result in a product A to G rating model similar to the EU Energy Label. However, the decision was made to cover not only environmental elements, so a framework has been developed that is able to address product + producer + supply chain at once (see diagram on page 16) against the applicable maturity level. We aim to cover key environmental and social aspects in the model.

Successes so far

The Initiative was first launched in November 2010 and already has some success to report. We have started to work in a small group focusing on filing and archiving products, with further categories planned for the future.

So far a number of office products companies have become actively involved:

- Resellers: Lyreco, Office Depot, Quantore and Staples
- Producers: Esselte, Group Hamelin and Jalema
- Trade: Office World and OSTAN

Below: The founding fathers of the Initiative from left to right.

Bert Janssen, Group Hamelin; Wilbert Hofmeester, Quantore; Yvonne Keljzers, Pasklaar Communicatie; Carlos Ortiz-Valero, Esselte; Cees van Manen, Office World; Diane Buggenhout, Lyreco; Taco Zevenbergen, Lejeune; Marcel Jacobs, Office Depot Europe.

Founders Marie-Louise Kruljssen, Staples, and Loek van Rhee, Jalema, are not pictured

