

Columns

Ways to Green a Small Business

By [Amy Sims](#)

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Smaller firms may not have the large budgets needed to deploy the latest green technologies, but there is still plenty they can do to limit their environmental impact.

Small businesses might be just that, but their carbon footprint and energy bills are a big problem. SMEs in the U.K. have an annual energy bill of about £3.5 billion and can waste as much as 30 percent of their energy unnecessarily, which amounts to losses of £1.1 billion per year or £7,000 per business according to the Carbon Trust.

Faced with this environmental footprint SMEs are increasingly starting to consider renewable energy, which is energy derived from essentially inexhaustible sources, such as the wind, sun, water or replaceable sources such as crops. Easily accessible renewable energy technologies potentially suitable for SMEs include solar water heating, solar photovoltaics, ground source heat pumps, small scale wind turbines, small scale hydro systems and biomass heating systems.

The gadgets are tempting. And the green PR can be priceless. But the choices are confusing and can small businesses really benefit from this type of technology or would such an investment be as wise as throwing money into the wind?

SMEs are crying out for independent advice, which a Global Action Plan partnership is providing in Devon. 'Renewable Energy for Devon' (RE4D) offers advice and support from initial enquiry to installation in the Devon area, and they advise that SMEs take a number of steps before taking the plunge with renewable energy technologies.

First up it is critical to make the business as energy efficient as possible by taking small steps and educating staff. Businesses, no matter their size, should make small practical changes before considering renewable technology.

Whether owned or rented a business space can have its footprint lightened through a series of small steps, such as properly insulating the roof and walls; putting low energy light bulbs in every light fixture; wrapping a thick jacket around the boiler and pipes; and turning off appliances over night.

There is a long list of these simple steps which a business can take to drastically slash their energy use and bills even if they have ten employees and work in a rented property. Above all else make sure staff are educated and encouraged on energy efficient behaviour such as switching off computer monitors when away from desks and only boiling as much water as needed when going to the kitchen for a cuppa.

Once the office is as efficient as possible the next step is to look at the energy supplier the company is using.

SmartWorks is a program run by the Global Action Plan program that advises SMEs in London on how to go green. The SmartWorks advisors recommend businesses switch to a renewable energy provider as it is a quick, effective, and in most cases, zero-additional cost way of powering your facility with renewable energy.

It's easy to switch and there is no Climate Change Levy for green energy tariffs. Businesses can also visit an [independent energy watch site](#) for information on available tariffs.

Finally, if you are still set on having your own renewable energy generation onsite it is critical to talk to an expert before making any decisions.

Everyone loves gadgets, and few know this better than hardware chain B&Q which sold loads of wind turbines to people who are now finding out that their home won't be illuminated by anything other than their red face anytime soon because their house is completely ill-suited for such a device.

When it comes to onsite renewables it is time for some tough love. Not all businesses will be suited for renewable energy technology. Renewable energy is incredibly site specific. If your business uses a lot of hot water, a solar water heater could be ideal. If you are on a hill a wind turbine may be an ideal solution. If you are constructing a new build it may be the prime time to install solar panels or bio-thermal heating.

But this is not the time to go it alone or get caught up in trends and hype, advice on renewable energy technology is essential to make the most of your properties green potential and help a small business stay financially sound.

Your investment could also be greatly helped if you identify the right grants available for renewable energy. Several initiatives such as the [Low Carbon Buildings](#) program and the [Carbon Trust](#) are able to provide independent information on what incentives your business may be eligible for.

Done properly renewable energy technologies can last 20 years or more with minimum maintenance and pay for themselves well within their lifetimes. But expert advice is the first step in finding out what technology would work at your businesses site, and realistically what will be the pay back on your investment over what amount of time.

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