Green collar workers

Green-collar worker (GCW) – a worker who has an interest, expertise, and knowledge in environmental issues and practices within organizations, and who is employed primarily for these reasons. A green-collar worker is an environmentalist, someone whose functions at the workplace include protecting the environment, encouraging sustainable workplace practices, and raising environmental awareness among co-workers.

These are the characteristics of green workers:

- recycles household waste;
- prefers to cycle to work if at all possible;
- belongs to a body or organizations concerned with environmental issues;
- has made energy saving alterations to their home;
- encourages the use of energy saving technology at work and lobbies for change;
- recycles paper at work;
- campaigns for green IT in the workplace;
- is interested in future energy efficient technology;
- raises money for environmental charities;
- avoids any product that they perceive to be harmful to the environment; and
- encourages others to do some or all of the above.

We do not precisely know the exact origin of this class of worker. The green workplace movement began when environmental awareness became a concern for companies. With the advent of the “Green PC”, organizations have become aware of the importance of being environmentally friendly in the workplace. From this awareness, the search for additional technologies and methods that reduce negative impact on the environment has grown.

GCWs work in roles such as environmental consultants, biological systems engineers, environmental lawyers, technology workers, and permaculture specialists. The clean energy sector is creating green jobs and they are blossoming in the emerging green economy. “Green-collar technology workers” (GCTWs) are being trained in and educated about environmental issues because of the technical skills required for their jobs in these sectors. However, GCWs are not just those employees whose job specifically requires environmental training or duties. They are advocates for the environment within their organizations and are mindful of whether the organization acts in a socially responsible manner with regard to environmental issues.

Green-collar workers may be more sensitive to their organization’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities in the environmental arena. CSR activities are becoming a means of recruiting as well as retaining better quality employees. Employees who feel that their organization is interested in causes they themselves believe in feel a stronger connection to the company that employs them, and will engage more.
Employee perceptions of CSR

It is not only green-collar workers who are aware of their organization's activities (or inactivity) in the areas of sustainability and environmental concern. Existing employees in general also become more engaged in the organization when they perceive it as being socially responsible. They want to work for a company that is a responsible citizen in the community. While employees work for pay, they need more to feel emotionally connected to the organization. This connection could develop through positive CSR activities. According to a 2004 survey, assuming equal location, pay, benefits, and responsibilities, 72 per cent of Americans said they would choose to work for a firm that supports charitable causes over one that does not.

Employees who view the organization as a good corporate citizen perceive it as one in which they will be treated equitably as well. Those who have favourable views of the CSR policies of the company also feel more positively about the integrity of senior management, senior management's sense of direction, the organization's competitiveness in the marketplace, and have a greater feeling of pride about the company.

Other surveys reveal conflicting information, however. According to them, although more job seekers want to work for environmentally friendly companies, opportunity for advancement is their top concern, with environmental policy ranking 18th of 20 items. As employees, however, this changes, with more than half of US workers stating they would like their employers to be more environmentally friendly and only 22 per cent believing that their company is doing enough or too much in this area. Sceptics consider organizational activities in the area of CSR as reflective of an interest for better public relations and corporate image rather than a true concern for the environment or other socially responsible issues.

It appears that companies may not be doing enough to inform their employees about CSR activities. Therefore, they may not be reaping some of the retention and satisfaction benefits from their employees that could be available. Organizations that seek to improve their CSR engagement will need support from their employees, so they will need to socialize employees to hold these values too, for example, supporting "green" activities. By intentionally recruiting and retaining green-collar workers, they may accelerate this process.

Younger workers may also contribute more to the development of a corporate culture that emphasizes and values sustainability. New generations of employees are seeking to work at companies that pay attention to stakeholders. Demographic changes indicate that organizations must be cognizant of the needs of these younger workers – as their numbers are growing while older employees retire. In response to this trend, employers are finding that developing an image as a socially responsible company helps them to attract younger workers, at all levels. Employees now expect social responsibility from employers, and those with "good" corporate images tend to attract a younger workforce. Among younger workers, there is more willingness to sacrifice salary in order to work for a green company. In order to attract younger workers, it is increasingly important to understand how generational membership impacts upon worker perceptions.

Knowledge about environmental issues

When individuals perceive environmental topics as having a personal and direct economic effect, they become more salient to them. Organizations that can relate their environmental efforts to employees in a way that demonstrates their personal impact will be more successful in engaging them and deriving support for those efforts.
Research regarding attitudes towards environmental issues seems to suggest that younger people are more interested in the environment and resource conservation. However, in this study, the reverse was true, as older people identified themselves as being environmentally friendly. This outcome can be viewed as benefiting the environmental CSR efforts since these older workers are more likely to be part of organizational management, and thus in a position to have a greater impact on these activities. Alternatively, we can view it as an increased awareness of the personally negative impact of wasting resources and money, or a realization that poor environmental management may harm future generations. Although there was some generational difference, most respondents identified themselves as being environmentally friendly, so they would be interested in being part of an organization that reflects this concern. Employees become more engaged in their work when they feel their interests align with those of their employer.

**Employee perceptions of CSR**

When employees who are highly aware of environmental friendliness populate organizations, companies should provide opportunities to promote these actions in the workplace. By promoting these actions, the organization is better able to connect its own CSR activities with the concerns of its members.

Workers with a higher green collar index were more interested in the organization's environmental activities. These individuals would have a better perception of the company if it participates in this aspect of CSR. When employees feel more connected to the enterprise, it enhances their performance.

Workplaces and schools that surmise that only extremists are interested in their CSR activities with regard to environmental causes should rethink their assumption in this regard. In this study, the vast majority of all respondents - 89 per cent regardless of generation - indicated that it is important to them that their company/school cares about the environment. Apparently, many organizations still have room for improvement with only 38 per cent having a department dealing with the environmental/sustainability issue. It was also remarkable that 27 per cent of respondents did not know whether their organization even had such a department. This outcome is indicative of the need for organizations to communicate more about their CSR efforts in this area.

Employees and students are more willing to recommend their organization to others when they viewed it as being environmentally concerned. This relationship should be of particular interest to both workplaces and institutions of higher education. Their perceptions of whether the organization is environmentally friendly positively related to the willingness of employees/students to recommend that organization to others. This relationship was significant and positive; therefore, when members are concerned about the environment, and that organization's activities reflect that concern, it positively affects the individual's perception. This positive perception has the effect noted earlier of improving the individual's engagement with the organization as seen through his/her willingness to bring others into it.

Of course, one study cannot definitively provide evidence that all organizations should take their environmental CSR activities more seriously. However, findings strongly support the contention that organizational members are aware of environmental activities. They are certainly interested in taking actions in their personal lives that are supportive of environmental preservation and organizations could harness this desire for their benefit as well.

**Mighty oaks from little acorns grow**

A clear signal has gone out to organizations that many employees want their...
workplaces or schools to be environmentally responsible, and would be supportive of CSR activities in this area. There are positive outcomes up for grabs by organizations that act upon this support to better publicize their environmentally friendly programmes, both internally as well as externally. These outcomes include improved corporate image, reduced energy costs, and employee support. Employee recommendations of a workplace provide one of the best sources of future employees, one of the most important resources for organizational success.

In the non-profit world of higher education, student recommendations should not be discounted either. These students become alumni who not only provide a pipeline for future students, but valuable contributions to support the existence of the institution as well. Both arenas would do well not to ignore the green-collar workers – they will have a continuing impact on their organizations.

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