

Taking cleaning carbon neutral

Lara Coutinho, ABM UK's newly appointed Environment and Sustainability Manager reflects on the path to going carbon neutral.

In the contemporary marketplace, green initiatives are not just about acting responsibly for local communities and future generations, but are also essential to remaining competitive.

This is why sustainability products, such as ABM GreenCare and Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design certification (LEED), are designed to support our customers to reach their green targets, whether that's for cleaning products that minimise environmental and air pollution, lowering the energy involved in waste disposal or minimising the amount of water used in cleaning. However, it's not enough to help others; we also need to ensure we're "walking the walk" ourselves.

One of my aims over the next two to five years is to focus on ways in which ABM UK can move toward becoming carbon neutral. This means minimising (and eventually stopping production of) carbon dioxide (CO₂); the greenhouse gas that increases acidity in the oceans and contributes to the planet's warming. Where we produce CO₂ in our cleaning operations and running our business generally we are exploring initiatives to support our sustainability targets, from planting trees and bio-diverse landscaping to unique site-specific technical solutions, created in alignment with our customer's values.

ABM UK will also be continuing to champion the benefits of eco-friendly cleaning products to our customers and the wider FM industry. My experience in planning and operational roles at major sporting events, including the rigorous testing grounds of the Rio 2016 Summer Paralympics and the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games, drummed home to me the benefits of these products. Not only do they clean to high standards, they also reduce energy and operating costs, protect air quality, preserve natural resources and enhance brand reputation.

We'll also look at ways to optimise and roll out the excellent ABM products already in existence, driving greater usage and pick up. This includes continuing the switch to renewable energy sources, something already started through our partnership with Bulb Energy, the clean energy providers, and our internal GreenShop programme which gives employees subsidised access to eco-friendly products.

Another focus area is innovation and the new systems addressing carbon emissions, water use and waste disposal in exciting ways. The team behind BioWhale, a bio-digester for food waste, for example, is doing an excellent job supporting our cleaning contract at Cabot Circus Shopping Centre in Bristol. Biowhale works by sending food waste to anaerobic digestion to be converted into electric or gas energy and fertiliser, and recently won a Green Apple Award for 'Environmental Best Practice in Property & Waste Management'. The process saw 100% of food waste from restaurants and cafes being recycled, as well as the use of plastic bags for food waste being eliminated. It's an innovative take on circular consumption that demonstrates some of the developing products that are out there.

Finally, we'll also focus on behaviour change and shifting people's actions on a consistent, day-to-day basis. Often people don't see how the things they do every day can help the overall picture. Perceptions can be entrenched. A small thing that can make a big difference includes introducing a pledge wall for our teams. A pledge wall asks individuals to leave a visual record of their commitments to making a difference, which can be simple things such as "I will avoid single use plastic," or "I will ensure I'm recycling properly". Through the pledge wall, our teams and our customers can start to see what's possible, have a degree of accountability and begin to see the potential of their own ability to enact positive change.

Looking at the bigger picture, reducing our carbon footprint and becoming more sustainable is something which will touch all areas of the company and feed into our business and financial objectives. We believe that the day on which we will be able to describe ABM UK as 'carbon neutral' is not too far in the future!