

ABA-EPA Law Office Climate Challenge: One Firm's Experience

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A colleague recently asked me to prepare responses to a multipage portion of an RFP for potential new business that requested information about our law firm's internal sustainability initiatives. The RFP covered a broad range of issues from waste reduction to energy conservation to greenhouse gas reduction. Fortunately, our firm was able to respond positively to many of the questions, in part due to our participation in the ABA-EPA Law Office Climate Challenge (Challenge).

What is the ABA-EPA Law Office Climate Challenge?

The ABA's Section of Environment, Energy, and Resources (SEER) and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) initiated the Challenge in 2007 as a way to encourage law offices to take simple, practical steps to become better environmental and energy stewards. It focuses on two issues that almost all law offices encounter—paper and energy usage—and is separated into four programs:

- *Best practices for office paper management:* Implement policies regarding double-sided printing and copying, buy paper with a specified recycled content, and increase recycling.
- *EPA's WasteWise:* Adopt best practices for office paper management and quantify the benefits.
- *EPA's Green Power Partnership:* Buy electricity from renewable sources, such as solar or wind.
- *EPA's ENERGY STAR:* Adopt an energy management plan designed for law offices, and set an electricity reduction goal of at least 10 percent.

A law firm can become a partner in any or all of programs and can participate on a firm-wide or office-specific basis.

Why get involved?

At my firm, the idea of participating in the Challenge was initiated by several environmental and sustainability attorneys, including me. We were aware of the Challenge through our involvement with SEER committees and became interested for both professional and personal reasons. We were already assisting clients with participation in voluntary sustainability and green certification programs for their businesses, so we thought going through the process internally would allow us to give better advice. Our clients were starting to ask the companies they do business with about their sustainability initiatives, and we knew it would not be long until our firm was asked the same questions. We also saw opportunities to help our firm save money during the recession by becoming more energy efficient and reducing waste. And we generally believe that conservation is the right thing to do.

When we reached out for additional volunteers, we were overwhelmed by the positive response. We learned that other attorneys and staff at our firm were working independently on similar issues. The records department was trying to reduce paper files through increased electronic storage, while the information technology team was evaluating ways to cut energy usage by servers and computer hardware. The office managers were exploring how to make supply purchases more sustainable and reduce waste from meetings and break rooms. The Challenge gave us a reason and a process to address and solve these issues together.

How does my office implement the Challenge?

The ABA's [Challenge website](#) provides great resources on how to implement the programs. Below are some ways my firm has worked to implement the Challenge. We have achieved partnership under the best

practices for the office paper program and are still actively working to implement other policies, some of which go beyond the Challenge's scope.

Do your homework. Before approaching our firm's leadership about the Challenge, a small team of attorneys prepared a summary memo that addressed key cost and benefit points. We obtained general figures related to the firm's paper and electricity usage and the availability and cost of recycled paper and green energy programs offered by our office's local utilities. We also explained additional benefits that could result from becoming a partner in the Challenge.

Form a Challenge committee. Attorneys and staff interested in these issues joined the committee. Staff members provided invaluable practical input and were able to spend time researching ideas when the attorneys had to attend to billable matters. We also formed three subcommittees—waste and purchasing, energy, and service and education—that could research ideas and report back to the full committee.

Start small and be mindful. Our committee spent its first year brainstorming ideas, gathering information (e.g., does paper in our recycling bins actually get recycled?), and addressing the "low hanging fruit" issues (e.g., modifying our paper practices to meet the requirements of the Challenge). We also tried to be mindful of how a policy might impact the way an attorney practices. The diversity of the committee helped us to anticipate concerns, test ideas with small groups of staff, and simplify policies before rolling them out.

Measure and communicate results. Entering its second year, the committee continues to address new ideas to reduce waste and energy usage. We created an internal website with educational material and information on firm programs, such as cell phone recycling and our participation in the 's [One Million Trees Project](#). We are exploring how to measure and quantify the results (e.g., money saved and greenhouse gases reductions) so we know what is working and what might need to be revisited. We also hope to make the information available on our website so that others can learn from our experiences.