

Sustainable strategies: Big and small – You can implement in your firm

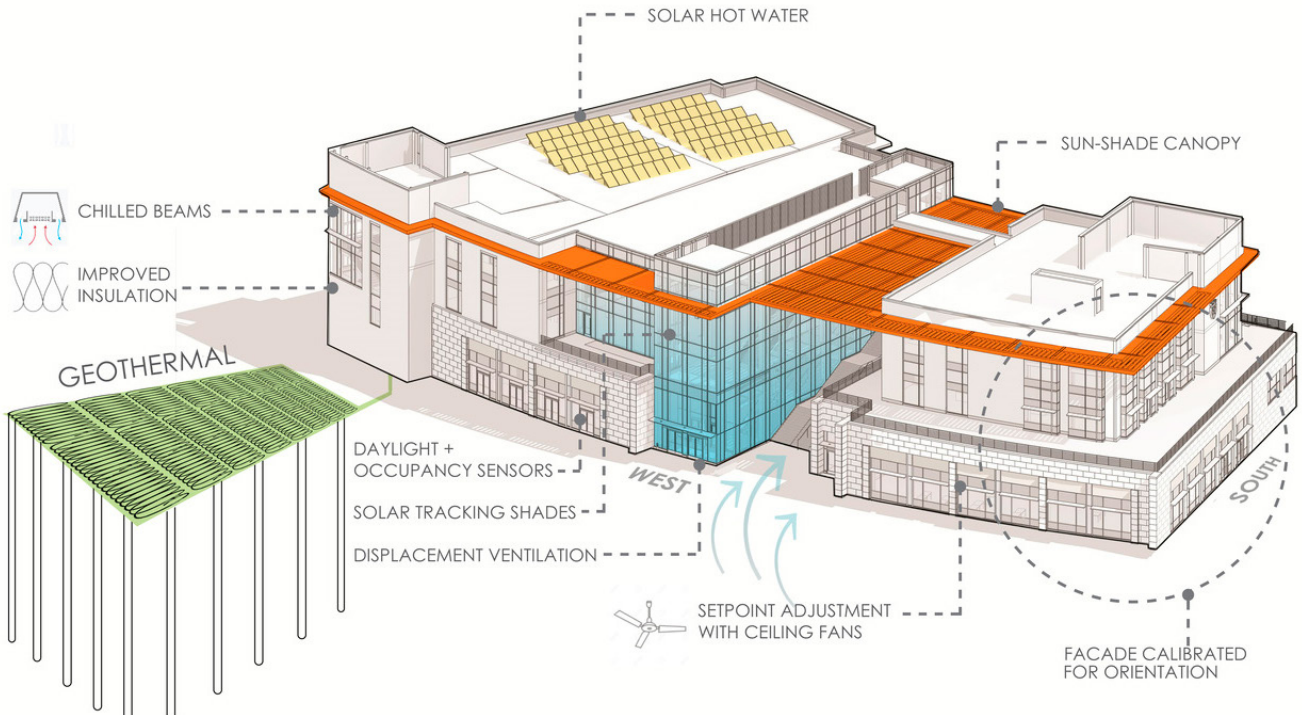
As architects, we know sustainability in design is our ethical responsibility, both as major contributors to the built environment and thought leaders in running the business aspects of practice. While we understand the weight of our responsibility, the question remains: How?

At Duda|Paine, this question is and will be ongoing, and the answer is ever evolving. Taking on the task of becoming more sustainable can be overwhelming for an architectural firm. What's important is that the firm begins to make steps, big or small, to move their practice to a more sustainable future. Many firms take different approaches and can offer valuable lessons on what worked for them in their unique circumstances. Strategies based on our experiences strengthening sustainability within the practice include:

- Assemble an employee group to brainstorm ideas and implement sustainability protocols.** In the words of Margaret Mead, “Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.” This group should ideally be composed of employees with diverse levels of experience. Recent graduates offer fresh perspective and unbridled passion for sustainability. Upper management offers the leadership skills to usher through and implement new ideas. When we approached the leadership of our firm, we found they were very supportive of becoming involved in the AIA 2030 challenge, the highest levels of LEED certification, and even investigating the WELL Building Standard for our future projects. To generate well-rounded strategies, we included perspectives from design, marketing, and administrative staff members. Sustainability is imperative at the building scale and in daily firm operations. Your team won't feel confident about designing an energy-efficient building when they see glaring discrepancies in the sustainable practices of a firm's workplace.
- Gather ideas, big and small.** First, seek to understand the motivations and interests of the group. Understanding why each person cares makes an enormous difference in fostering a sense of purpose. Then, implement a “no bad ideas mentality” to get the conversation flowing. Whether the idea is switching to local coffee purveyors or investing in full-time sustainability staffers, make a list of anything and everything group members bring to the table.
- Subdivide goals.** There are many ways to think about sustainability. For our efforts, we split goals into two categories: firm operations and architectural design strategies. From there, the process became all about deciding what to do first and getting buy-in from employees to make it happen.
- Firm operations example.** For years, we had a recycling system that wasn't living up to our aspirations and expectations. Simply put, too many recyclables ended up in the landfill. To fix this broken system, we first switched from a private recycling company to the city of Durham's program so recyclable materials could be commingled. We coordinated with a newly trained cleaning staff about what to recycle and the city's schedule. We then purchased and distributed additional recycling bins. Implementation of the program took significant effort and coordination among several groups. The bonus? The monthly cost saved from switching to free city recycling allowed us to invest in a monthly composting service as a new sustainability goal.
- Prioritize goals.** Another aspect of goal setting is to consider what is accomplishable in the short term versus the long term. With busy project schedules, we don't have the opportunity to do everything all at once. So, we asked, how can we take incremental steps to improving our design practice? Having a priority list provides the firm a plan of action to make ongoing progress.
- Long-term priorities example.** One of our most critical and ongoing goals is to increase awareness of building energy use in our clients' projects and to mitigate energy use in our designs. To chip away at this key priority, we decided five years ago to adopt the framework of the AIA 2030 Challenge. In our first year of implementation, we identified one project to submit, the Emory Student Center. Emory got our feet wet and gave us the knowledge to continue the firm's efforts and expand our project submissions year after year. We have now developed a simple, easy-to-follow framework for enabling project managers to record their project data, which allows us to record the energy model data for all our active projects. Some projects meet the goals of the AIA 2030 Challenge, and others are simply recorded. Either way, we deepen everyone's knowledge of the energy use of our buildings, share the results firm-wide, and see how different buildings stack up against one another. This comparative data enhances our efforts to create more finely tuned energy-efficient buildings.

Other strategies to consider:

- Have employees host in-house lunch-and-learns to distribute sustainability knowledge gleaned from project work.
- Create shareable/editable resource spreadsheets to capture ideas, identify goals, etc.



- Research the sustainable properties of materials commonly specified by your designers. Create an internal “red list.” Example: We researched wood veneers and removed threatened species from the material library, shared knowledge with firm staff members and leaders, and created a new veneer library.
- Research and test software to simulate energy modeling. Create in-house experts who can train and implement energy modeling.
- Create solar study methodology to research effectiveness of overhangs, fins, and frit by using simple shadow studies in Revit and distribute information via in-house lunch-and-learns.
- Encourage staffers to become LEED Certified by offering reimbursement for testing fees.

While no “one size fits all” approach exists for making an architectural practice more sustainable, incremental efforts are well worth a firm’s time and energy. Big or small, every effort is cumulative in moving our industry toward a better future. The path isn’t always clear or easy, but we must challenge ourselves and our peers to prioritize the responsibility we have as leaders in the built environment.



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