

Services & Maintenance: Avoiding The Landfill

Contributor Walt Munroe addresses how reuse and recycling are among the disposal strategies for surplus furniture.

By Walt Munroe

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One of the universal problems faced by facility managers (fms) is what to do with furniture that is not needed any longer or that has reached the end of its useful life for their organizations. Disposing of furniture into the trash is one option; however, with the environmental impact in mind, many fms are moving away from this route. Also, with the knowledge that a facility in need might have use for the furniture, fms may be interested in finding a new home for these items.

To address this concern, some industry suppliers and other groups have created programs to help fms find an alternative to disposing of their furniture in landfills. Through extensive networks of recyclers, resellers, non-profit agencies, and charitable organizations, fms can have the choice of donating, refurbishing, reselling, or recycling their retired workspace furnishings.

One program involves a partnership with the Institution Recycling Network (IRN) that helps organizations find environmentally responsible solutions for their surplus office furniture. The program helps determine and implement the best end of life strategy for furniture, regardless of who manufactured it. This resource provides the previously mentioned disposal options which can be offered alone or in combination. Each option can add social, environmental, and, often, financial value to the fm's organization.

The donation portion of the IRN program matches furniture to non-profit needs. Donation recipients usually include U.S. cities devastated by natural disasters as well as developing communities looking to build infrastructure by using the items to furnish schools, clinics, and businesses. A furniture surplus dilemma for one organization can become a meaningful act of goodwill that greatly benefits others.

A recent example occurred earlier this year when the University of Notre Dame Law School in Notre Dame, IN moved into a new 85,000 square foot facility. The university had only a week to



Loading surplus furniture for shipment to Haiti relief efforts, Univ. of Notre Dame Law School

dispose of all the furnishings in the previous facility to make way for renovation. After consulting with its furniture dealer that had introduced them to its partnership program, the university decided to donate the furniture.

IRN arranged for the removal of the items and matched them with the non-profit organization Food for the Poor. Because of Notre Dame's action, eight containers of more than 1,600 pieces of furniture were diverted from the landfill and sent instead to charitable organizations in Jamaica and Haiti. In the end, donating the furniture actually cost the university less than discarding it.

Julie Boynton, senior project manager for interiors at Notre Dame, explains, "We try to reuse all we can that comes out of old facilities through our on campus surplus program. In the case of the law school, there was so much, the surplus program didn't have room for it all.

"In this partnership, we've found a win-win-win answer to the problem," she continues. "The furniture isn't going to a landfill, two worthy charities are receiving much needed furnishings, and the project actually saved Notre Dame money. It cost \$14,000 to have IRN recycle the furniture, but would have cost around \$20,000 to send it all to a landfill—not to mention the untold cost to the environment."

The university recognized the opportunity of an alternative approach to disposal—one that would reduce waste in a landfill.

So where can an fm start given a similar situation? Contacting his or her product vendors or manufacturers, as Notre Dame did, to obtain information about end of life options is often the quickest way to commence a recycling or donation process. Most vendors and manufacturers realize the need to manage their offerings better throughout the entire product lifecycle. Therefore, it is likely they will be able to offer direction and information to help fms learn of disposal options.

Recycling The Materials

In addition to supplier programs, there is an increasing number of recyclers—both for profit and not for profit—that can minimize an fm's time and effort in this type of endeavor.

Typically, the disposal process will take much less time and effort if a third-party facilitator is used. A third-party firm or vendor will take the type of material used to manufacture the furniture into consideration to determine an appropriate disposal strategy. While every industry and manufacturer ought to consider the recyclability of the materials that go into their products, there are some materials that are more commonly suited for recycling than others.

Furthermore, because several natural resources are depleting, recycling is even more critical for products containing certain materials. Steel, for example, is a depleting, non renewable resource, which makes it a highly valued commodity. With relatively higher amounts of recyclable content, steel and other metals are very appropriate for recycling.



Combining reuse and recycling, nearly 100% of surplus furniture can be kept from the landfill

Virtually all scrapped metal has some value per ton; however, the cost to recycle the metal may surpass the return. Oftentimes, it is possible to sell and capitalize on furniture that is in reasonably good condition. In addition to metals, furniture and materials that can be separated easily and/or disassembled and channeled through the proper recycling stream can facilitate success.

Once recycling activities are complete, the recycling firm provides documentation of furniture and material in terms of “tons in, tons out.” Acquiring this data, which details how the old products were responsibly disposed of, is important, because it provides the metrics to support any claims the firm’s organization may want to announce. Government institutions do not currently recognize responsible disposal efforts; however, the data will facilitate communication to employees and stakeholders explaining the socially responsible actions taken by the organization.

Industry Resources

The amount of effort required by an firm to proceed with a program depends upon the chosen strategy, as well as whether or not a third party is involved. In Notre Dame’s case, IRN prepared a detailed project proposal and budget, as well as providing metrics to inform employees and stakeholders that the old products were removed in an advantageous way instead of being discarded in a landfill. In general, the level of sophistication of the program or partner will influence the efficiency of the process.

The existing options and alternatives for furniture disposal are realistic and viable opportunities for firms. As illustrated in the Notre Dame story, the outcomes of responsible furniture disposal go far beyond financial rewards. The university has not only helped reduce the waste discarded in landfills, but now it has an admirable story to go along with the opening of its new law school. In a marketplace today that is concerned with environmental responsibility, this worthy point of differentiation is without a doubt invaluable.

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