

GREEN OFFICE OR GREEN BLUFF? BEYOND THE BUZZWORDS - WHAT ACTUALLY MAKES AN OFFICE GREEN?

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GREENWASHING, GREEN POLICY AND GREEN OFFICES IN A NEW ENERGY ERA

The conversation around so-called “sustainable offices” is louder than ever. Employers post proud photos of living walls, recycled paper coffee cups and rooftop hives, while glossy annual reports promise net zero everything by 2030. Yet when we asked 1,000 office workers and 200 facilities managers spanning the United Kingdom, United States, Singapore, India, New Zealand and Hong Kong to describe what actually happens inside their buildings, the answers painted a very different picture. 97% of companies said they had at least one sustainability initiative in place, but only 59% ranked sustainability as a strategic priority, and even fewer could show solid evidence of falling energy use, lower waste streams or shrinking emissions.

Most initiatives fall into the low effort category: a recycling poster in the pantry, a token herb garden on the balcony, or periodic reminders to switch off screensavers at night. These gestures may look good in a newsletter, but they do little to tackle the stubborn sources of environmental damage locked into lighting, heating, air conditioning, procurement and end of life asset management. The gulf between aspiration and reality is wide enough to erode trust among employees, investors and regulators, and it is beginning to distort the market for genuinely green products and services. This report explores that gulf, explains why it persists and maps out the vital slice of activity, the 3%, that delivers real environmental impact.

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THE EXPERT VIEW

Walk through most “green” offices and the truth is there: they are designed to be ripped out and binned in a few short years. Three years on, the desks, chairs and finishes are landfill fodder. It is fast fashion in corporate form, glossy, short-lived and wasteful.

A genuinely sustainable workspace starts with materials and furniture built to last. Quality pieces can be reused, reconfigured and kept in circulation, cutting waste and slashing the need for constant refits. That is the essence of a circular approach, not just swapping one disposable look for another.

The problem is that many green claims crumble under scrutiny. And now, greenhushing is on the rise. Companies with real progress to share are keeping quiet, worried that one slip will unleash a public pile-on.

The result is a trust vacuum. People who care about sustainability are left wondering who is walking the talk and who is just talking. The only way to close that gap is with proof, not slogans.

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Joy Lam

Group ESG Director,
Crown Worldwide Group

A MIRAGE OF “SUSTAINABLE” ACTIVITY

Intent often outpaces delivery. The modern green office narrative began as a fringe idea in design journals but migrated quickly into mainstream management rhetoric as public concern over climate change grew. Client tender documents now demand evidence of low carbon operations, shareholders factor environment, social and governance scores into valuations, and rising energy prices make efficiency sound like common sense.

Furniture suppliers advertise upcycled ranges, and renewable electricity prices keep falling.¹

Every one of these trends creates pressure to talk green. Yet intent alone cannot cut carbon. Site audits reveal repeating patterns: staff pride themselves on reusable mugs while fluorescent tubes blaze all night; polished concrete floors are poured for the industrial chic aesthetic while heaps of perfectly serviceable carpet tiles head to landfill; building wide air conditioning chills meeting rooms booked for virtual calls with no one inside.

WHY HAS AMBITION STALLED?

Asked to identify the single most important ingredient of a sustainable workplace, respondents overwhelmingly chose renewable energy, followed by verified low carbon materials and ruthless waste prevention.²

The World Economic Forum confirms the trend, reporting that fewer than 25% of companies possess reliable tools to measure indirect (Scope 3) emissions or embodied carbon.³

Less than **10%** published cradle to cradle data for newly purchased furniture.

Without measurement, leadership cannot manage, and without management the loudest ambitions wither into well worded statements attached to projects nobody owns.

¹ International Energy Agency Renewable Cost Tracker, 2024.

² Crown Workplace Wellbeing Pulse, Q4 2024.

³ World Economic Forum Global Risks Report, 2025.

THE PERCEPTION GAP INSIDE BUILDINGS

Facilities managers tend to score their workplaces higher than do the people who occupy them. Staff see the hard to hide contradictions: redundant laptops stacked in cupboards because the organization fears data wiping costs, yet new devices purchased every budget cycle; janitors separating recyclables only to mix bags after collection; fashion driven refurbishments that dump desks and chairs still under warranty.

Managers rated their offices **8 out of 10** for environmental performance; employees gave a **6**.

These inconsistencies breed cynicism. Once belief falters, even credible programs struggle to gain traction, because employees treat every initiative as another round of optics.

“
81% of facilities managers expect to be undertaking more sustainability initiatives in the next 3 years. ”

Crown Workspace Survey, 2025

The perception gap sometimes comes down to a simple lack of communication too. While Facilities Managers and other senior staff associated with physical premises are often sold on sustainable activity (Sustainability was the second most commonly cited reason for a desire to downsize offices in our survey*) the lack of clear communication about what they're doing makes things opaque for your employees on the frontlines.

Three most cited reasons for firms wanting to downsize offices:

1 To encourage collaboration and innovation: **29%**

2 To align with sustainability goals: **28%**

3 To upgrade the office: **27%**



GREENWASHING AND GREENHUSHING

The United Nations Environment Program defines greenwashing as any communication that convinces the public a company or product is environmentally sound when evidence says otherwise.

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60% of published claims [about green credentials] offer no verifiable proof.
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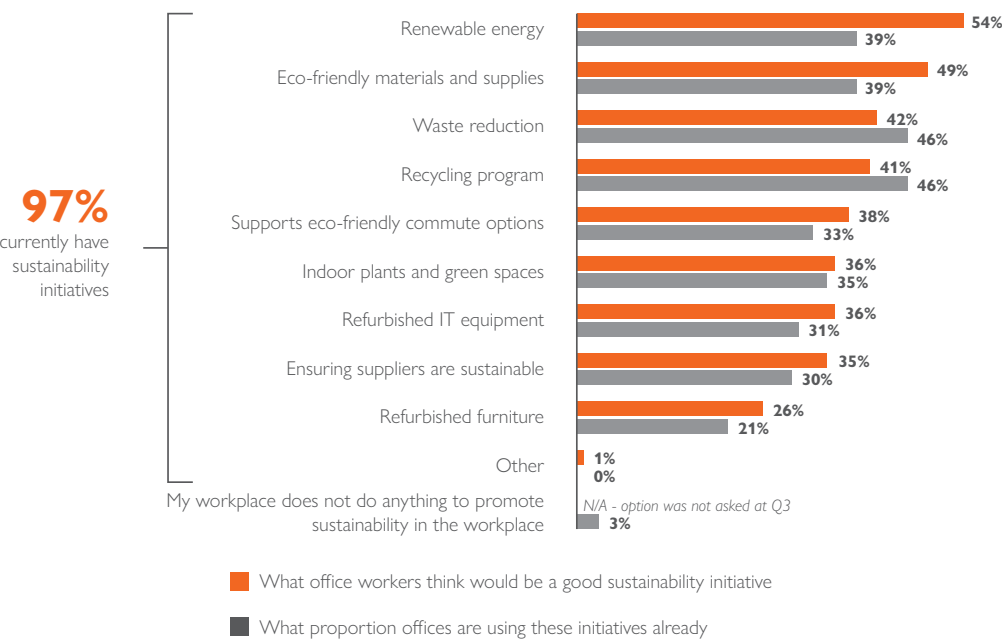
Planet Tracker

Greenwashing takes many forms. A landlord may trumpet a lush plant wall while heating the lobby with gas. A tenant may boast of responsibly sourced stationery while sending hundreds of functional desks to landfill during a cosmetic remodel. Harvard Business Review calls the trend “green sheen” and notes that corporate storytelling often races years ahead of genuine operational change.⁵

Regulatory attention is mounting. The Securities and Exchange Commission in the United States now seeks detailed carbon disclosures; European watchdogs scrutinise every marketing phrase that hints at climate neutrality. As scrutiny grows, some firms fall into the opposite trap: greenhushing. Afraid that any claim could backfire, they under report even legitimate advances. An Asia Pacific survey found 82% of executives worried about being accused of exaggeration, pushing many to communicate less.⁶ Greenhushing deprives the market of success stories and slows collective learning, an unintended casualty of the fight against hype.

All the priorities that employees and Facilities Managers listed here are relevant - and energy is indeed one of the most important, but there’s often a lack of understanding about how energy policy actually works at a grid level (even at higher levels).

What makes a sustainable workplace vs current sustainability initiatives in the office:



Crown Workspace Survey, 2025

⁴ Planet Tracker, The False ESG Economy, 2023.

⁵ Harvard Business Review, Green Sheen and Corporate Risk, April 2024.

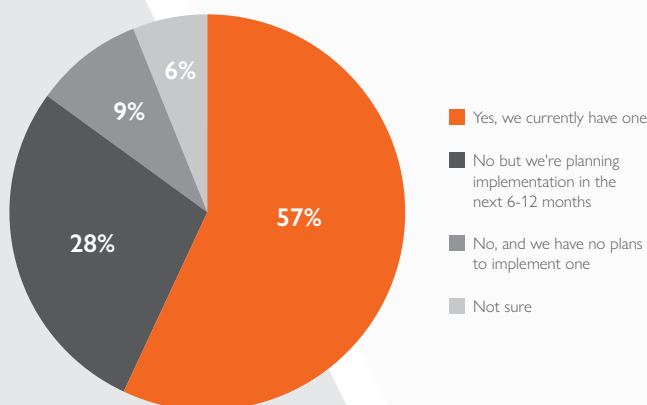
⁶ Asia Sustainability Leaders Sentiment Poll, May 2025.

THE SUSTAINABLE ACTIVITY THAT DOES MATTER: A CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN BOTH THEORY AND PRACTICE

Against this noisy backdrop, circular economy programs stand out for measurable results. Circularity keeps products and materials in use at their highest value for as long as possible, eliminates waste by design and regenerates natural systems. In an office context the concept manifests as pre refurbishment asset audits, remanufacture of seating, modular flooring that can be returned to the supplier, laptop leasing with guaranteed take back and digital marketplaces for surplus fixtures. 98% of facilities managers in our study said they would buy refurbished furniture if logistics and warranty matched new, and most reported 40% cost savings when they tried.⁷

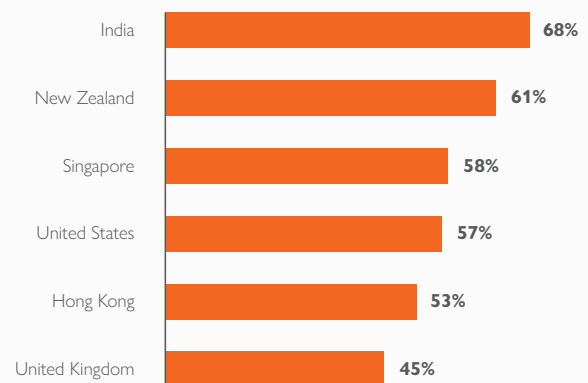
A simple comparison illustrates the power of repair. Manufacturing a typical ergonomic chair emits roughly 70 kg of carbon dioxide equivalents, most of it from steel and aluminum. Stripping, repainting and reupholstering the same chair emits fewer than 10 kg, largely transport and labor.

Do you have a circular strategy to recycle / upcycle equipment:



Crown Workspace Survey, 2025

Countries with a circular strategy currently in place



Crown Workspace Survey, 2025

Multiply that delta across a 100 seat office and the emission cut is equivalent to removing a family car from the road for a year. Crown Workspace's Renew Centre network alone has diverted more than 3 million kg of furniture from landfill since 2015, saving 17,000 t of CO₂ and redirecting thousands of items to schools and charities.⁸

Something important to emphasize: circularity is not charity. Refurbishment avoids raw material costs, freight charges, import duties and disposal fees. Carbon pricing, already mandatory in the European Union and planned elsewhere, will widen the financial gap between new and renewed assets. Savings fund additional improvements such as LED relighting or sensor based air conditioning. Extended warranties and service contracts supplied by refurbishers further reduce risk, while stories about resource stewardship serve brand reputation far better than a once a year pledge.

⁷ Circularity in Corporate Real Estate Study, ARUP, 2024.

⁸ Crown Workspace Impact Report, 2015 to 2024.

REGIONAL UPTAKE AND INNOVATION

Europe leads the policy front through the Circular Economy Action Plan, which promotes eco design, right to repair and transparent product passports. In the United Kingdom, Crown Workspace's Circulate framework guides clients through six practical steps: reevaluate current stock, renew what can be repaired, resell unwanted assets, rebuy certified refurbished goods, redistribute donations, recycle what remains and report the data. Singapore introduced national standards for

IT asset disposal, making it simpler for landlords and occupiers to certify responsible electronics recycling. Global consumer brands such as IKEA have committed to full circularity by 2030, forcing supply chains on every continent to rethink fast furnish models.⁹

OBSTACLES TO DEEPER CHANGE

Upfront cost still blocks many paths. Retrofitting a chiller plant, installing rooftop solar or licensing a cloud based carbon dashboard requires capital expenditure that short term finance metrics often resist. Small and medium enterprises lack access to preferential green loans, and larger corporates sometimes declare investments as “non core” despite long term savings. Policy instruments such as tax credits, green bonds and accelerated depreciation exist, but uptake is patchy and approval processes slow.

Infrastructure disparity compounds the problem. Offices in regions with coal heavy electricity grids face higher premiums for renewable certificates, making genuine decarbonisation harder. Reverse logistics networks for furniture and electronics vary wildly; in some cities certified refurbishers collect, strip and resell within days, while in other markets reusable assets travel hundreds of kilometers for treatment, eroding the carbon benefit.

A global green economy demands regional capacity building, not just good intentions.

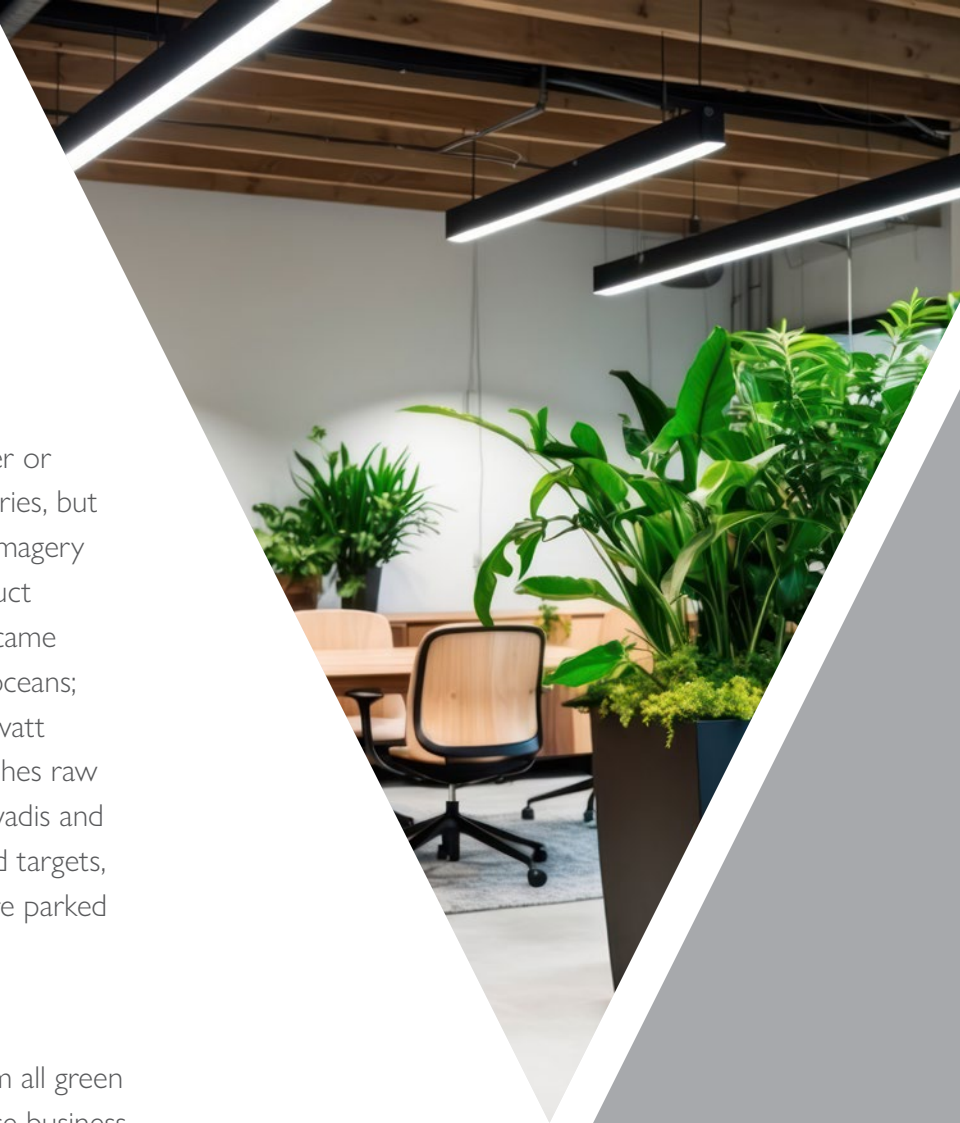
Finally, leadership and measurement remain weak links. Many boards congratulate marketing teams for awards won by single flagship buildings while ignoring the far bigger footprint of dozens of secondary sites. Data lives in silos, energy meters with landlords, purchasing histories with procurement, travel records with HR. Integrating these streams requires cross functional governance and executive mandate. Only when performance affects bonus pools do dashboards become decision tools rather than wallpaper.

AVOIDING THE BRANDING TRAP

Marketing versus substance is not an either or choice. Companies can tell compelling stories, but the narrative must follow proof. Satellite imagery exposes claims about rooftop solar; product passports reveal whether leather seating came from chrome tanned hides flown across oceans; building management data logs every kilowatt hour. Credibility grows when a firm publishes raw numbers, invites assessments such as Ecovadis and shows the messy bits, projects that missed targets, suppliers that failed checks, ideas that were parked until technology matures.

Consequences of cynicism spread quickly. Employees who feel misled disengage from all green messaging, including genuine calls to reduce business travel or separate waste streams. Customers suspect exaggeration in other brand promises. Investors fear undisclosed liabilities. Reputation, once lost, costs more to rebuild than the price of doing sustainability right the first time.

Embedding authenticity involves three disciplines: setting science based targets grounded in sector pathways, allocating budget to achieve those targets and linking executive remuneration to verified progress. Joy Lam, Sustainability Head at Crown Worldwide Group, sums it up: tie action to evidence, publish your carbon data and stop siloing sustainability inside facilities.



REGIONAL SNAPSHOTS

Asia is a microcosm of rapid change and high stakes. India's office market forecasts more than 1 billion ft² of new space in the next decade, and 38% of facilities managers expect those spaces to embrace hybrid working and robust sustainability features. At the same time, deep concern about greenwashing prompts cautious communication. Firms want to move fast but fear reputational harm if ambitions slip. Luis Contreras, Crown's Managing Director in Singapore says plainly "this is an area of increasing importance, but the sustainability argument is not as deeply embedded as it is in Europe. What we need to push things forward are clear results, and circularity provides that."

Europe operates under some of the planet's strictest environmental regulations. Tenants face rising energy performance certificates, while landlords must upgrade older building stock or risk obsolescence. The emphasis on lifecycle thinking drives demand for products designed for disassembly, indoor air quality that supports employee health and biodiversity corridors on corporate campuses.

North America shows contrasts. Californian tech headquarters chase net zero carbon and water positive designs, but many suburban offices rely on aging mechanical systems. Only 12% of facilities managers across the U.S. foresee major transformation in the near term, yet impending disclosure rules from the Securities and Exchange Commission may accelerate adoption.

Emerging markets hold the promise of leapfrogging. Cities like Nairobi, Sao Paulo and Manila can incorporate circular principles into new urban plans, avoiding the retrofit backlog facing older economies. Challenges include financing, skilled labor and reliable supply chains, but the appetite for frugal, resource efficient solutions is strong.



SO HOW DO WE ACTUALLY GET FROM RHETORIC TO OBSERVABLE RESULTS?

Close the data gap first. Energy sub metering, material passports and cloud based Scope 3 calculators turn guesswork into dashboards. Publish results in annual sustainability reports, obtain independent assurance and invite peer comparison. Transparency attracts partners and investors who value clarity over spin.

Engage employees early and often. Workers sit closest to wasteful behavior and can spot quick wins. Co design campaigns, reward practical ideas and show performance data on communal screens. When staff see kilowatt hours drop after a lighting upgrade, participation climbs in the next initiative.

Invest where impact lives. The circular economy, renewable energy procurement and transparent reporting deliver most of the environmental return

for every dollar spent. Redirect budget from single use murals or themed tote bags into asset tracking software, refurbish workshops and power purchase agreements.

97% of green office claims remain buzzwords because they chase appearance rather than substance. The 3% that count hinge on circular design, truly renewable power, rigorous measurement and leadership that takes responsibility for results. Companies that focus on these fundamentals cut emissions, trim costs, attract talent and build resilience. Sustainability need not be flawless, but it must be honest, evidenced and enduring if it is to earn the trust of the people who occupy offices and the communities that surround them.



A MISSING LINK: SUPPLIER SCRUTINY

In New Zealand, our clients are held to rigorous sustainability standards: audited Scope 1, 2 & 3 reporting is mandatory for government agencies and top NZX-listed firms. The real challenge lies with suppliers and competitors who make bold sustainability claims without credible data to back them up. Certification, carbon accounting platforms, and transparent net zero strategies should be non-negotiable. Businesses serious about sustainability must choose partners who are 100% accountable for the claims they make. This is something companies regardless of location often miss: scrutiny over your office suppliers.



Andrew Fullerton-Smith

General Manager,
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Crown Workspace is dedicated to consistently supporting clients workplace needs as they change and grow. We have been moving people and businesses for over 50 years and understand that no two projects are the same. Our objective is to provide clients with hassle free and sustainable workplace change projects.

We tailor our services to each unique project, be it corporate or specialist, with sustainability at the core of everything we do. Our services and expertise span across commercial and specialist relocations, moves and changes, IT services, furniture, interiors and storage.

Built on the legacy of the Crown Worldwide Group, Crown Workspace is complemented by a number of other divisions offering business services all over the world. These include international logistics, relocation and mobility services, records management and fine art services.

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