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WORKPLACE GROUP

HARD CHOICES FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN COMMERCIAL FITOUTS

Despite sustainability becoming a central theme in many business strategies including here at Active, many UK businesses face a seeming paradox: despite their commitment to environmental responsibility, many fall short when specifying truly sustainable materials and technologies in their office refurbishments. The balance is usually tipped by a range of economic and logistical factors that influence decision-making. Often tipping the balance away from the most sustainable choice.

On the whole companies are still choosing to pick just the low-hanging fruit.

Pound notes aren't green anymore...

Like it or not financial considerations often hold the most sway when it comes to project scope and delivery. The upfront capital cost of sustainable products compared with more conventional alternatives still makes all the difference. Sustainable materials—such as certified reclaimed timber, recycled metals or low-carbon composites—frequently carry higher list prices and require careful sourcing, potentially increasing procurement time and complexity.

Occasionally, companies such as ourselves, need to quote higher tender prices and extended lead times when specifying these products, and some sustainability certification processes introduce additional consultancy and compliance fees. These upfront costs can be particularly acute in scenarios with constrained budgets or where short-term returns on investment are prioritised over long-term benefits.

A clear example of this cost dilemma appears in the market for solar photovoltaic (PV) panels. Solar energy is one of the most effective ways to lower operational carbon emissions in a built environment, yet the dynamics of the global solar supply chain complicate procurement decisions. Chinese-manufactured solar panels dominate global markets and are substantially cheaper than their European counterparts; reports indicate Chinese modules can cost around $0.15 per watt, while European-made products may cost nearly twice as much per equivalent capacity.

The cost advantage of Chinese panels reflects economies of scale, integrated manufacturing, lower labour and energy costs, and state support for export competitiveness. For UK companies refurbishing office buildings, this means solar installations dependent on imported panels are significantly more affordable when sourced from China than when specifying European-made, more sustainable alternatives. Procuring European solar panels often comes with a price premium of around 10 – 15 per cent or more compared to Chinese imports, meaning the capital expenditure budget for a refurbishment can be materially higher if sustainability standards extend beyond performance to include regional production.

From a carbon perspective, prioritising the lowest purchase price does not always align with the lowest carbon footprint. Solar panels manufactured and shipped from China incur embodied carbon from long-distance transport and production on grids with higher carbon intensity than many European facilities. In addition, Chinese production is deeply integrated with global polysilicon supply chains, which themselves contribute significantly to lifecycle carbon emissions.

That said, we find at Active that the operational carbon efficiency of solar arrays still tends to outweigh these initial impacts over the asset's lifespan, offering net carbon savings relative to grid electricity generation.

Of course, solar is just one example. At Active we have sourced any number of planet-friendly materials to be used in office fit-outs from a range of suppliers, but they are not always the cheapest option. Take for example the carbon neutral Marmoleum from Forbo – carbon neutral at worst and carbon positive at best, its installation can save tens of tonnes of carbon across a commercial floor area, but the cost per square meter can almost double the initial outlay for petrochemical based standard linoleum. Our clients have to make an impossible choice when it comes to doing the right thing by the planet and the right thing by their stakeholders.

Reuse and Recycle

Reusing existing structures and fit-out elements can dramatically reduce carbon emissions compared to wholesale replacement. Office refurbishments that reuse existing partitions, furniture and carpet could reduce embodied carbon by over 95 per cent compared to full replacement. Yet many companies still opt for complete replacements, drawn by brand consideration, perceived quality, uniformity or short-term budget simplicity—despite the environmental cost.

Who's responsibility is it?

In many cases, short lease terms or imminent space turnover discourage our clients from making deep-green investments; firms may decide that paying a sustainability premium makes less sense if they do not expect to occupy the space long enough to realise energy cost savings or justify capital outlays.

Finally, while broader policy incentives exist—such as grants for low-carbon retrofits or future mandates for solar on new builds—current frameworks may not fully offset the cost delta for more sustainable choices. Without stronger fiscal incentives or carbon pricing mechanisms explicitly linked to refurbishment decisions, companies often default to cheaper, conventional options.

We understand the dilemma because we live it too.

At Active we also wrestle with the knowledge of the long-term economic and environmental benefits of sustainable office refurbishment being well-recognised, and the reality of procurement decisions reflecting short-term financial pressures and practical constraints.

Do we install Electric Vehicle support in our head office and invest in fleet that may not have the range we require or do we wait until the figures get better? What if we need to expand our office space in the near future - do we use top of the range sustainable flooring that we can't take with us?

For us and for our clients, meaningful alignment of financial incentives with carbon reduction goals, improved transparency on lifecycle impacts, and greater availability of competitive low-carbon products will be essential to shift refurbishment practices toward sustainability more consistently.

Until that time – we are doing our best and we know how to help our clients to do their best too.

GET IN TOUCH!

Active Workplace Group
Unit 4, Headley Park, Reading, RG5 4SW

T: 0118 9442 903
E: hello@activeworkplacegroup.co.uk

activeworkplacegroup.co.uk

@activeworkplacegroup

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