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On Green Building

Contractors of 'utmost importance' in green buildings movement

BY H. KENT CRAIG
SPECIAL TO CONTRACTOR

Editor's note: Paul von Paumgarten is director of energy and environmental affairs for the building efficiency business of Johnson Controls where he has worked since 1982. He served on the board of directors of the U.S. Green Building Council from 1999 through 2005 and served as the co-chair of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Steering Committee. He was also founder and chairman of the LEED/Existing Building Committee from 2000 to 2002.

CONTRACTOR contributing editor for project management, H. Kent Craig, interviewed von Paumgarten in late July about the green building movement and mechanical contractors' role in it.

Question: The so-called "green movement" toward reduced energy consumption in buildings in particular and society in general has all of a sudden become the fashionable, in-thing to do. Why do you think this is?

Paul von Paumgarten: It's almost as if a lightbulb has collectively gone on. Global warming is a reality, whether we want to believe it or not; we all know something's going on.

The amount of resources that China and India are and will be using is staggering!

The cost of energy will never go down, and we need to get used to that fact. Within that, we have the technology now to accomplish these needed goals of energy reduction. We either

put in place voluntarily these new standards for energy efficiency, or we have them mandated to us by the government..

Q: Many in our industry are still "old school" where all they, and the owners they work for, see is costs-costs-costs when you mention retrofitting green or sustainable technologies into existing buildings, and they resist "going green" because of it. What would your response to them be?

PvP: Making a building more energy efficient actually decreases operating costs and increases property values and because of those factors the actual lifecycle cost of the building also decreases as well.

Q: What about the people who work inside these buildings? Doesn't use of sustainable technologies make those workers less comfortable and less able to do their jobs?

PvP: Quite to the contrary. Green technologies in buildings actually increase worker productivity, not decrease it. Just a 1% increase in worker productivity blows all other cost factors away, and it's not unusual to show a larger increase in worker productivity than 1% after a building has been green-retrofitted.

Look at it these ways: 95% of the original cost of building a building is to accommodate those that work inside it; and 95% of the cost of a building's operational cost after it's built is to maintain the comfort level of its occupants. So, you can see where green technologies and methodologies more than pay for themselves in real dollars in productivity gains.

Q: But the argument will be, especially for existing buildings, that green retrofitting still costs money that most owners don't want to spend. How can a typical building manager or contractor use green-oriented knowledge to save a building owner money?

PvP: The first step would be to optimize a building's BAS [building automation system]. The systems we at Johnson Controls put in are simply not being used to their full potential and that's very discouraging to us.

A building's BAS should be tweaked and pushed to its very limits and that's very rewarding for us to see our systems used this way. It also represents opportunities for contractors as well.

Q: How does or how can exotic green technologies present opportunities for the typical contractor who reads this magazine?

PvP: The green building rating systems, especially LEED, revolve around energy consumption and indoor air quality and that is the domain of the contractor — 60% of the available LEED/green credits revolve around these two factors.

While architects and engineers design it, it's the contractor that actually delivers the final product and because of that they are of the utmost importance.

You can sit on the sidelines or get in the game and become part of it. Become educated, attend seminars, consider becoming an accredited LEED or other professional and start marketing it into your business.

Q: What about those who still think all this green-stuff is just today's passing fad and won't be around in the future?

PvP: If you're not going green, then you're on your way out of business.

Your competition is "going to get it" and become the contractor of choice unless you do it first. Being green anymore isn't a luxury, it's a necessity. The technology which drives green is no longer a dream of tomorrow, it's here right now.

Green is not about hugging trees, it's about making good business decisions. Owners and builders of buildings are going green because it saves them money; it's about their green dollars.

Q.: Anything you'd like to say in closing?

PvP: CEOs of major corporations are passionate about this, and that will drive this movement toward energy savings and being environmentally and people-friendly even further.

If you and your company don't become passionate about it too, you'll be drummed out of the corps. If you don't embrace it, then you will become the radical fringe. The U.S. Green Building Council is driving the standards that will probably become mandatory in the future, so contractor involvement and input into the process is important in the here and now.

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