

Green-collar workers on the rise

Environmentalism is now the mainstream, some business observers say.

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Birkenstocks meet business suits. The “green” movement has moved beyond the Sierra Club to Wall Street.

Fortune 500 corporations and small companies are making sustainability a part of their game plans. It’s become good business to meet the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

“Environmentalism used to be out of the mainstream. Now venture capitalists are putting one-third of their capital toward green technologies,” said Gayle Oliver-Plath, CEO of G3 Agency, a recruiting firm for green jobs, and founder of www.careereco.com. “They’ve woken up and seen that solving challenges like dwindling resources and changing climates is good for the economy and the planet.

“These problems are changing companies, spawning new companies and creating a ton of new business opportunities. We’re going to see a lot more green-collar jobs in the future.”

Oliver-Plath founded CareerEco, an online community where environmentally conscious companies, university researchers, government agencies, organizations and job seekers can exchange ideas and information.

“What we’re seeing is a great opportunity for capitalists and environmentalists to get on the same page,” she said.

It can be a win for both, said Melissa Vernon, director of sustainable strategy for InterfaceFLOR, the U.S. commercial carpet division for Interface Inc. Founder Ray Anderson built the first plant in LaGrange in 1973 intending to make carpet and money. Other than complying with government regulations, he gave little thought to environmental issues until he read Paul Hawken’s “The Ecology of Commerce” in 1994.

“He said it was like a spear in his chest,” Vernon said. “He saw that his industry was plundering the Earth to make a product and then throw it away. He realized that we couldn’t look to government to save us. We had to look to business.”

That epiphany changed the path of the company and its culture.

“We found that we could save a lot of money by reducing waste and how we used resources,” Vernon said. “Now we consider ourselves a sustainability company that makes carpet.”

As the company rethought its designs, processes and products, it found that many of the creative ideas came from its own employees. The company now runs its plants with renewable energy such as solar, wind and landfill gas. Waste elimination activities have totaled \$107 million since 1994, and the waste cost per unit of production has been reduced by 48 percent. InterfaceFLOR designs its carpet so it can take it back. Its recycling plants create jobs in Georgia and around the world. It has invented the technology to use recycled fibers in new carpet.

The company’s showroom in Atlanta was the first space in the country to receive a platinum rating with the Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System for commercial interiors.

“For employees, working for an environmentally responsible company means that you can bring your whole self to work. You don’t have to check your values at the door. Sustainability has become a way of life here, and one of the results is low employee turnover,” Vernon said.

Once, companies such as InterfaceFLOR had to educate their customers on the advantages of being environmentally conscious.

“Now the ‘green movement’ is being driven by customers who want to know what a business is doing to be sustainable,” said Jerry Scher, principal of Peak Focus, an Atlanta coaching and consulting company. After sitting in on meetings of the Sustainable Green Printing Partnership, an organization dedicated to helping printers be environmentally friendly, Scher published “The Green GPS,” a step-by-step guide to assist printers in implementing a green/sustainable plan.

“Printers already have the FSC and SFI certifications that show that they are using papers that inflict the least damage on the environment, but now printers are being asked to look at all of their processes,” said Scher. He wrote the guide for small and mid-sized printers who wanted to be pro-environment, but didn’t know where to begin.

“If they start with a strategic plan and set up benchmarks, sustainability doesn’t have to be more expensive. Looking at their printing products, processes and envelope [everything that is a part of the business from low-flush toilets to not using Styrofoam cups] companies have a huge opportunity to eliminate waste and reduce operating costs,” Scher said.

“Companies are beginning to see that it’s a good and a smart move. Every day I read the stories on www.environmentalleader.com and I see creative, significant and impressive changes taking place.”

Many of those changes are happening in new “clean/green technology” companies that are looking at ways to save natural resources and reduce pollution, Oliver-Plath said.

“We’re going to see more green jobs come out of our search for renewable energy sources,” she said.

Suniva Inc., a manufacturer of solar cells used in solar panels, opened its first factory in Norcross in June. Suniva already has \$1 billion in sales contracts with leading solar panel makers Solon AG and Titan Energy Systems Ltd., and it plans to employ 100 people in the first year, said Wendy Rosen of Antenna Group. In November it opened a second production line to double its manufacturing capacity.

Company founder Ajeet Rohatgi of Georgia Tech’s University Center of Excellence in Photovoltaics believes that Suniva’s new efficiencies and innovations in creating solar cells will make the company a market leader and drive down the costs of solar energy.

Suniva CEO John Baumstark said the company is “pleased to be moving into our next phase of growth close to home, and we are interested in working with state and local government to create an ecosystem of clean energy companies in the Atlanta metro area.”

One of those companies, C2Biofuels, has made great progress in producing cellulosic ethanol from pine chips.

“This is one of the most promising, near-term solutions to help us reduce our use of oil-based transportation fuels,” said Roger Reisert, C2Biofuels’ president and CEO.

Biomass fuels don’t emit greenhouse gases and are renewable because they come from plant material.

“Other regions are studying corn and grasses for fuel use: Georgia has an abundance of pine trees grown for the saw timber business. They are on a 35-year replaceable cycle, marginal agricultural land [so they aren’t taking away land for food crops] and don’t require pesticides or fertilizer,” Reisert said.

Working with Georgia Tech and UGA scientists, Reisert started the business in 2005 and is fund-raising to build a pilot plant. He’s projecting to build the first commercial plant in 2013.

“The state could support five plants on a sustainable basis, costing about \$250 million each and employing around 70 people per plant,” he said. “That doesn’t include all the jobs related to growing, harvesting and delivering the trees and fuel.”

He’s excited to be part of a cutting-edge growth industry that is making a difference.

“For every gallon of fossil fuel we save, that’s less carbon emissions into the environment and more economic development that we are keeping in this country,” he said. “Our biggest challenge is doing it quickly enough.”