

Office Depot creates a uniform recycling solution

Office Depot warehouse and driving staff all wear uniforms, but the sewn-in logo made it difficult to find a sustainable, end of life disposal route. The company then found a local social enterprise which was able to cover the logo and re-use the clothing.

Introduction

When Office Depot, leading global supplier of office supplies and solutions, decided to look for a sustainable disposal route for used uniforms in the UK and Ireland, it struggled to find the answer, until it discovered a re-use option just around the corner.

The disposal of uniforms presents a unique challenge to businesses. Although they may not at first look like a major waste stream, large businesses replace tonnes of clothing every year, with old items typically ending up in landfill. Organisations which try to give unwanted textiles a second life face the problem of finding a partner which will not only be able to put the clothing to use, but will also be able to remove the company logo before doing so.

Security issues

Christy Jones, Health and Safety Specialist at Office Depot, explained: "All of our drivers and warehouse staff wear a uniform embroidered with the company name.

"Passing the clothing on without removing the logo poses a real risk of fraud – we have to ensure that no unauthorised personnel would be able to pick up that uniform and knock on someone's door, claiming to be from Office Depot. That is also a concern if our staff put their old uniforms into a charity clothing bag, so we were very aware that the clothing could not be recycled by us as a company while it still had our logo on it."

Christy Jones, Health and Safety Specialist,
Office Depot

Key facts

- 1,300 employees wear Office Depot uniforms
- If replaced annually, this amounts to just over three tonnes of textile waste each year
- To be suitable for re-use, logos need to be removed or covered

Quantities of clothing

Office Depot operates four major distribution centres and six smaller transport hubs in the UK and Ireland. The main Office Depot brand supplies offices through large-scale contracts, while the Viking brand services SMEs and schools. With 1,300 of the company's 2,200 employees wearing a uniform which is eligible for replacement each year, unwanted clothing can mount up.

Each employee is issued with five polo shirts, five short-sleeved shirts, three T-shirts, two pairs of trousers, and one fleece. Jones



Office Depot staff are encouraged to place old uniform items in a container for re-use when they collect their new uniforms

calculates that each member of staff potentially disposes of up to 2.4kg per year, with a company total of just over three tonnes. In 2009, she started to look into what happened to the unwanted clothing and discovered that the majority was placed in household bins, either to be sent to landfill, or donated to charity shops.

Recycling options

Jones was disappointed when she began to explore options for recycling or re-using Office Depot uniforms. She said: "Lots of people wanted to take the uniforms from us, but no one wanted to take the over-locked logo off. Actually, we were happy for it to be covered up; it didn't have to be unpicked as long as it was not visible. If someone wanted to over-stitch it, that would be fine."

Struggling to find a solution, and having no luck searching the internet for ideas, Jones turned to the National Industrial Symbiosis Programme (NISP). NISP managed to source a number of potential options, but none was able to take the project to fruition.

Jones said: "We just kept hitting a brick wall. We had already collected a large quantity of uniforms and they were starting to look unsightly. Suddenly we faced a deadline to remove them.

"At the final whistle, as it were, NISP came up with a solution. The company was able to collect the next day, and it even turned out to be based on the same industrial estate as Office Depot, just half a mile away!"

Christy Jones, Health and Safety Specialist,
Office Depot

Solution

Goodwill Solutions collected the uniforms and covered over the logos before distributing the clothing to its volunteers. The community interest company (CIC) helps to create jobs and volunteering opportunities, taking in unwanted furniture, household and office items and making them available for re-use. It was able to remove one tonne of uniforms from Office Depot in the first instance and now operates an ongoing arrangement, making collections around once a year, when the tote used for storage is full.

Cost saving

Each tonne of clothing removed saves Office Depot around £70 in landfill costs. Since Christy Jones shares an office with the person responsible for issuing new uniforms, it is straightforward to place the tote nearby with a 'Recycled Uniforms' sign indicating where clothing should be left.

Aside from the issue of removing the logos, Jones advises similar projects to think about storage: "Thankfully our storage area is under a canopy, so the clothes stay dry. If they got soaked in the rain they would go mouldy, so they do need to be kept in the dry. It's also quite hard to make them look tidy, so you need to appreciate that and try to address it.

"Finding a way to dispose of used uniforms is still quite difficult. It was the hardest part for us, even though the initial concept was great. It is quite shocking in a way, because approximately 11,000 people work on Brackmills Industrial Estate where Office Depot has a large distribution centre and office building. All of the companies issue uniforms and they are desperate to recycle them; there is an enormous market for it. We are just pleased that we have found a way to divert even more material from landfill, and that it can be sent for re-use, which is the best form of disposal."

While we have tried to make sure this case study is accurate, we cannot accept responsibility or be held legally responsible for any loss or damage arising out of or in connection with this information being inaccurate, incomplete or misleading. This material is copyrighted. You can copy it free of charge as long as the material is accurate and not used in a misleading context. You must identify the source of the material and acknowledge our copyright. You must not use material to endorse or suggest we have endorsed a commercial product or service. For more details please see our terms and conditions on our website at www.wrap.org.uk

**Waste & Resources
Action Programme**

The Old Academy
21 Horse Fair
Banbury, Oxon
OX16 0AH

Tel: 01295 819 900
Fax: 01295 819 911
E-mail: info@wrap.org.uk

Helpline freephone
0808 100 2040

www.wrap.org.uk/content/facilities-management

