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The Queen's Awards

Changing people's lives while saving the planet

GREEN WORKS

Office furniture and staff are both given a fresh lease of life, writes William MacNamara

Green Works is attempting to save the world through office furniture.

Its formula for social betterment might start with a nondescript conference table. On reaching the end of its useful life with a FTSE 100 company, Green Works will take it, save it from the landfill and help the environment.

The company will then sell it at a discount to any number of charities, materially aiding their operations, or will dismantle it and recycle its components.

The truck carrying the table away from the large corporation's offices might be driven by an ex-homeless man; Green Works tries to recruit its workforce from marginalised communities and rehabilitate them in their day-to-day work life.

"The furniture itself is only an engine for change," says Colin Crooks, chief executive of the company, which has five huge warehouses, mostly in the London area. "It can change people's lives and save the environment."

Mr Crooks started the company seven years ago while working as an environmental consultant. "In environmental consulting, I found that the most difficult, immutable waste stream was from furniture," he says, adding that an estimated 400,000 tonnes of furniture is dumped every year in the UK, clogging landfills.

"At the same time I was a councillor for Lambeth - my night job," he says. "Every community organisation I went to see had a desperate need for office furniture. Their chairs would be tattered and of bad quality, and some didn't even have a filing cabinet. "There was an obvious market opportunity."

Green Works, a recipient of a Queen's Award for sustainable development, is a social enterprise structured as a not-for-profit organisation. It receives public grants. But it also generates revenue. Last year, its turn-over was £2.1m, enough to break even.

It makes money by charging clients - often City banks and law firms - to take away their furniture when they move offices. The priority for these companies, says Mr Crooks, is not resale value but prompt, efficient disposal - often of cubicles and chairs that number in the hundreds.

When furniture reaches Green Works' warehouses, the company's carpenters often rework them. Chipboard cubicles become coffee tables, and cedar conference tables become bureaux.

Any member of the public can buy such re-modelled furniture from the warehouse at competitive prices.

"The furniture that offices use now is robustly made and will last a long time, but the ownership cycle has shortened - from 20 years to, say, five or 10," says Mr Crooks.

"Furniture has become like a fashion accessory, easily thrown away. It would be a travesty not to encourage people to re-use this."

Whether kept intact or reworked, most of the furniture is destined for the offices of the UK's thousands of charitable organisations. They buy at a "significant discount" but still pay a fair rate.

This is important as much for the self-respect of the charities as for Green-Works' own workforce, says Mr Crooks.

Long-term-unemployed people, ex-prisoners, and other people from marginalised groups find employment at Green Works through its partnership with Goals UK, a social enterprise that sponsors skills-training programmes.

"We need to show many of our employees that things are not given away, and that services

of timber. It is more energy-intensive than producing steel," he says. His determination to keep the furniture out of landfill, he says, is one of the reasons the company will never make much money and must be structured as a social enterprise.

If furniture cannot be passed on or reworked, Green-Works pays to disassemble and recycle its components, painstakingly sorting a variety of woods, fibres, metals and alloys.

Its social enterprise status qualifies Green Works for public grants, but they represent only about 5 per cent of turnover.

The public money is used exclusively to fund research and development projects, Mr Crooks says. The company is experimenting, for example, with new technologies to rework old furniture.

It is researching how to market re-used carpet tiles to the public. Such research, Mr Crooks says, could help Green Works grow far beyond its UK scale.

As part of an initiative by MP Claire Curtis-Thomas, Mr Crooks visited Sierra Leone and has committed Green Works to furnishing the town of Waterloo's libraries, health centres, and small businesses. The town was decimated during the country's civil war that officially ended in 2002.

"Claire Curtis-Thomas asked the town authorities: 'What do you need?'," he says. "And despite the prevalence of Aids and lack of medical equipment, they said, 'we want a library.'"

"Most of the town's population is under 16, and education was their biggest priority.

"We can furnish much more than the town's library," he says. "I know it sounds like an exaggeration, but we could probably re-equip that whole country from our warehouses."



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Colin Crooks
CEO, Green Works

are delivered at a certain time to certain standards and expectations," Mr Crooks explains.

While social rehabilitation is one of Green Works' many aims, the environment is still its priority. Keeping furniture out of landfills at any cost is paramount.

One problem of dumping wood furniture in landfills, Mr Crooks says, is that the wood decomposes and produces methane, a gas far more dangerous to the atmosphere than carbon dioxide.

The popularity of chipboard in office furniture, he adds has also hurt the environment in unappreciated ways. Manufacturing chipboard takes a huge amount