

WORKING PAPER: LOW CARBON DEVIANTS (1)

Introduction

First draft of a working paper summarising progress in the Low Carbon Deviants (LCD) action research project. We are approximately half way through the project: what have we learned and what do we need to do in the second half?

Findings / Actions

It was hoped that organisations would be able and willing to complete their own carbon audit i.e. self-assessed but most needed assistance with this due to time constraints and unfamiliar and unfriendly audit web sites.

We can't change this for cohort 1 but future phases need much audit sites that are simple and FUN. Basic recognise and reward ideas can be brought into a 'flat' site such as the existing LCD one but a quantum leap would be to turn the whole journey into a game to encourage and maintain interest.

Similar comments apply to capturing sufficient supporting evidence to enable constructive feedback to be provided for action plans. Adding videos to the web site has potential but organisations were concerned about property security and protecting the privacy of employees.

Security could be enhanced by limiting viewing to only items of specific interest e.g. lights and windows and/or maintaining property location anonymity. Privacy issues can be overcome by taking videos at the start or end of the day when employees are not around. The focus on quick-win carbon savings may change to more substantial issues as pressures from the community and society increase.

Obtaining a sufficiently accurate measure of baseline carbon emissions also required input from an expert at World Land Trust (WLT) using current ERDF figures. This was due both to the weaknesses of online auditing tools and the current industry desire to measure to unrealistic degrees of accuracy. There seems little need to measure to two significant figures when so many of the underlying assumptions are so vague.

The usual quantitative vs. qualitative battle is in evidence here and the need to measure to any significant degree of accuracy is largely removed by a zero-carbon mind set. Providing the current emissions are measured with a sufficient allowance for error, steps are then taken to reduce and the rest offset via a credible scheme, the actual amount reduced by those steps becomes largely irrelevant (unless costs and benefits are both significant). Likewise the need to calibrate emissions changes against climate, headcount, etc. diminishes in a carbon neutral business making annual reviews easier.

Grouping companies by size or sector is of dubious value, especially in a very small cohort. These seem to provide little indication of organisation attitude towards environmental issues due mainly to the influence of individual owner-managers in small businesses. This was a problem in the earlier LCC programme which adjusted assistance through the mentoring phase but structured delivery on largely the same basis for all eighty-five cases.

Grouping companies by type using our 'Wizard of Oz' metaphor (Lion, Scarecrow, Tin Man and Emerald City) will help ensure differing types of advice and support are provided. These will hopefully emerge over the remainder of this phase from the grounded input of existing champions with similar attitudes. We have unilaterally designated our types based on findings; a questionnaire, votes from champions or similar grounded approaches will be better in future.

A common trait of small business owners is lack of time and money. Even though the services provided so far have been delivered at no financial cost getting companies – especially Tin Men - to provide time to the project has been difficult.

The LCC programme model of three set training & mentoring days is unlikely to work with less environmentally driven Tin Men / Lions. We won't get the learning / mentoring time needed so will trim down and make optional using digital media. This might not be needed at all if the champions provide the help needed.

Engaging with existing champions has so far proved unsuccessful. A passive email from Suffolk CC failed to get any response and engagement with social media has been difficult with not much to say (although this doesn't stop Stephen Fry). The Neutral Territory site may also have confused / deterred people from contributing.

Moving to a dedicated Low Carbon Deviant site with live content might help focus any input of champions. Quickly implement a game-based rewards & recognition scheme around psychological rewards (Kudos, stars, league tables, etc.) and physical ones (trees, land, cash, etc.).

Current carbon audits tend to address important yet somewhat superficial issues such as travel and property. What we are not seeing yet are any fundamental changes in core business activities to reflect moves a low carbon business as opposed to a business that lowers carbon. This is now known as the Fairline Fallacy based on the analogy provided by Will Thomas from University Campus Suffolk.

I suspect this shift will not come about quickly or easily. Being structural it will need external pressure from society and community rather than internal organisations and individuals. More help and thought needed in phase 3.

There has not been much interest in applying for the Suffolk Charter even though most cases in the first phase can achieve bronze level if they wanted to. We have assisted this process by providing the evidence required. The general reaction has been resistance to what are perceived to be an unnecessarily complicated document. It simply isn't worth the effort.

We propose changing the complicated Suffolk Carbon Charter (scan) to the simple World Land Trust Public Pledge (attach). This change from private policy to public pledge is easy, transparent and can be validated by peers rather than experts. It's interesting to compare bigger carbon neutral outfits who also encourage a zero-carbon mentality in their very large clients? Why did ANSWER opt for an incremental approach?

There are no relevant grants available to support change. Previously there was match funding linked to the LCC programme (although take up was poor).

Will LCD peer pressure suffice? Only time will tell!

Technology is supposed to be helping deliver the LCD programme at low cost yet has had limited impact so far. This is partly due to delays with the web designers (no surprises there) but hopefully a simple blog site using standard WordPress themes & technology will suffice for this phase.

A site moderator is likely to be needed to encourage and rewards contributions but their experience will be useful in designing a more automated version in future. Commenting has proved tricky as many people aren't used to it and will need to be easier in future.

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