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Eco-friendly buildings offer employee benefits

by Todd Loesch

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The chairs and desks lining the third floor of Merchandise Mart may seem like ordinary office furniture. But looks can be deceiving.

The green materials and manufacturing used to make them can actually help businesses become more environmentally friendly. And in the process, they can help buildings save money and earn the coveted LEED status for being eco-conscious.

Having that certification has benefits beyond simply going green.

"There can be a lot of different benefits," said Karin Barden, the manager of membership and operations for the Chicago chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council. "It probably depends on where your building's located. Obviously there can be tax incentives to do that."

The U.S. Green Building Council developed LEED, which stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, to score buildings based on specific characteristics such as energy efficiency, water use and indoor air quality. Depending on the score, buildings or offices can be awarded one of four different certifications ranging from Certified and Silver to Gold and Platinum.

From an owner's perspective, she said having that status often makes a building more valuable because he or she can charge higher rent because many people specifically look for a LEED-certified space.

Barden said many renters prefer these green offices because they save money on energy. Additionally, she said making a building more eco-friendly can have positive effects on employees' health.

"There are studies out there that show that your employees' sick days go down, your employee efficiencies go up, productivity goes up," she said.

Many times, a business doesn't need to completely gut its office to become certified. Colin Rohlfing, an architect with HOK, said the improvements to the Chicago office of the international firm were relatively simple.

HOK installed new faucets and aerators in the bathrooms that significantly reduced the building's water consumption. In this case, saving money wasn't the company's motivation.

"Nobody in Chicago pays for their water anyway, so it was more of an environmental thing to do," Rohlving said.

However, HOK did save by reducing their energy consumption. Almost all of the company's laptops, printers, refrigerators and TVs are Energy Star rated. The HOK office, situated at 60 E. Van Buren St., is one of nine buildings in Chicago that's received the Platinum LEED status, the highest possible.

Buildings and businesses looking to get LEED-certified can contact the U.S. Green Building Council at 312-245-8300 or visit <http://www.usgbc-chicago.org/>.