

# A force for change

An organisation's most valuable asset is its people. But too many are ignoring the power staff have to contribute to energy saving. **Dr Phillipa Coan** explained to *EiBI* how that can change

**A**ny approach to energy management relies on three key factors," says Dr Phillipa Coan. "People, technology and data. There is just one problem. The people aspect is often not on the radar."

Dr Coan is one of a rare breed of business psychologists turning their skills to energy management to enable organisations to use their workforce as a cost effective asset to save energy. So the workforce, instead of being part of the problem, becomes part of the solution. "Often organisations opt purely for technical and/or data solutions without considering how their people can lead to successful outcomes", she says.

The key to success is an effective blending of technology, data and psychology, believes Dr Coan. "No single discipline has the answer. That's where the barriers exist towards progress in energy management. There has to be a marriage."

Her newly formed company, STRIDE, reflects this philosophy. She has teamed up with one of the UK's most respected consultants, John Mulholland, to bring together his technical knowledge with the emerging demand for behaviour change solutions. "Getting the staff involved should be the first port of call," says Dr Coan. "If you have an engaged workforce, not only can you start making substantial savings from systems already in place but, if you do introduce additional technology, it will have more impact because people will understand why it is there and so will be more likely to embrace it."

One of the first obstacles to overcome is getting buy in from energy managers, she believes. "Even if they seem interested in the behavioural side, they are often juggling multiple priorities and responsibilities and working either by themselves or in a very small team. Trying something new just seems like a mountain to climb. I have to clearly communicate how behavioural

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opportunities are likely to make their lives easier."

Some energy managers may say 'we've tackled behaviour change in our organisation. We don't need to do any more'. While they might have scratched the surface, says Dr Coan, they are unlikely to have gone deep into the science to explore potential opportunities. "Organisations will often introduce energy-saving awareness-raising interventions based on assumptions or something that has been seen to work for others. This often centres on giving information to employees, putting up posters, and appointing energy champions."

But there is a fundamental flaw in this approach. "This is an off-the-shelf

solution," says Dr Coan. "No attempt is made to fully understand what behaviours you should be targeting. For example, what behaviours are likely to have the greatest impact? What behaviours do employees have the most control over? There is no point encouraging employees to take action over energy use if the specific action is not within their control - either technically or because they do not have the authority to take the action. Also nobody has fully explored the specific workplace environment: what existing opportunities and barriers exist?"

She also believes that the context of the target audience must also be examined, especially their current

capabilities. "Do they have the skills or do they need training? Do they have skills that can be brought from home?"

Of top importance is to determine the motivation and drivers of the workforce. "You may be motivated because it's inherently enjoyable or part of what you value," says Dr Coan. "Or you may be driven by external consequences so you might want a reward or to avoid a sanction. Alternatively, it might just make you feel good about yourself. Across an organisation multiple motivations may be relevant and so will need to be incorporated into the strategy."

A common mistake is the belief that financial incentives will always work. "While they may work in the short term, they reduce intrinsic motivation over time. If the supply of money suddenly stops then so does the behaviour."

Dr Coan finds that non-financial rewards such as simple praise can be just as valuable. "I recently visited a manufacturing company where an employee had been instrumental in re-building a new piece of equipment that made the whole process more efficient and saved the company a lot of money. He never got any recognition and as a result said he wouldn't bother in the future. When I asked what his ideal reward would have been, he said all he would have wanted was a letter from management saying thank you."

Another of the key challenges is how to embed the change. She doesn't want to be a consultant that goes into a company and then disappears and hopes for the best. "It's about the organisation recognising that they have the solution. They need to come up with the solutions and take ownership."

It's also crucial that a behaviour change programme fits with the overall corporate strategy, she says. "A company I worked with had a policy that involved people being paid bonuses if they actually owned a second car. This is a clear example of conflicting messages."

There is a real shift towards accepting behaviour change as a key element of any energy management strategy, believes Dr Coan. "There is so much potential out there. People want to be proud of the company they work for and having an engaged workforce all working towards the same common goal of lowering energy consumption is certainly something to be proud of." ■