



Exceptional Workplaces®

Giving gloves new life: Illinois Sustainable Technology Center takes recycling to the next level

testimonial



The Challenge



The Illinois Sustainable Technology Center (ISTC) is a division of the Prairie Research Institute at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Its mission is to drive statewide economic growth through sustainability. To fulfill that mission, ISTC conducts scientific research and, in the process, uses a lot of gloves.

"We conducted a waste audit to see how we could go to zero waste in our own building and realized that gloves were about 10 percent of our total waste by weight," said Shantanu Pai, ISTC assistant sustainability researcher. "We were already effectively recycling other items – glass, aluminum, paper and cardboard."

The Solution



To further reduce its waste stream, ISTC needed to recycle its used gloves. The question was how?

Kimberly-Clark Professional® Territory Manager Blake Ashley had the answer: an innovative program called RightCycle® by Kimberly-Clark Professional®. RightCycle helps research labs and pharmaceutical companies divert waste from landfills, while converting hard-to-recycle products such as nitrile gloves and garments into flowerpots, lawn furniture, benches and bicycle racks.

"When we heard about this program we were extremely excited. It embodies features aligned perfectly with our mission and focus," said ISTC Director Kevin O'Brien, Ph.D.

Since ISTC was already using Kimberly-Clark® Purple Nitrile® gloves, Pai said moving to RightCycle was an easy transition.

"If you're already buying Kimberly-Clark gloves, you have no excuse not to do this," he said. "Your clients and your stakeholders are going to demand this soon, so you'd rather be doing it before they demand it."

Launched in 2011, RightCycle is the first large-scale recycling program for non-hazardous lab and cleanroom waste. In four years, the number of customers participating in the program has significantly increased, leading to the diversion of more than 170 tons of waste. Kimberly-Clark Professional® recently expanded the program to Western Europe and is exploring growth in other regions.



The Results



ISTC has achieved tremendous success through the RightCycle program – reaching 89 percent compliance in its labs – even higher than the rate for paper and cardboard recycling. Some organizations would be happy to stop there. But not ISTC. They decided to take the program a step further.

In the summer of 2014, the Student Sustainability Committee funded a project through ISTC to recycle the Kimberly-Clark® Purple Nitrile® gloves worn by foodservice workers in a single dining hall.

"You use a lot of gloves in foodservice," Pai said. "In the back of the house, you can change them at least every 30 minutes. It's a good thing, but it's also a lot of waste."

The dining hall pilot has been a success. With an estimated diversion rate of 90 percent, the university hopes to expand it to other dining facilities and labs around campus.

"The biggest appeal about RightCycle for me is that it's the start of an EPR, an Extended Producer Responsibility, for a material that we don't often think about," Pai said. "Gloves are not 'a sexy item' to recycle. But gloves are a high-volume, fast-moving commodity used by almost every industry. Once people start getting good at recycling paper and plastic – the primary commodities – we're going to have to move to the secondary commodities and gloves are one of them. Gloves bring you to that next level."

To date, ISTC and the University have diverted 3,480 pounds, or approximately 225,500 gloves from landfills. It's an achievement that led to ISTC receiving a 2014 Greenovation Award from Kimberly-Clark Professional® along with a bike rack made from recycled materials.



"RightCycle has had a huge impact on our activities and our sustainability metrics," said O'Brien. "If you ever have used gloves as part of your laboratory work, you quickly appreciate the value this program brings from a sustainability perspective. What I really love is the bicycle rack at the entrance to our building that was made from recycled nitrile gloves. It attracts a great deal of interest from employees and visitors alike. It demonstrates the value of the program and motivates others to become even more sustainable in the performance of their work."



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