

Assessing your waste - Guidelines

Undertaking a waste assessment is a useful way to determine waste generation and costs. It is also an opportunity to identify issues, set benchmarks and improve on current practices to input into the development of your action plan.

You can determine how much waste your organisation produces via a desktop audit, a visual waste assessment or a physical waste audit.

Desktop audit

Desktop audits are useful to get an estimate of what is being wasted without having to trawl through a bin. Simply review purchasing records and receipts from your waste or recycling contractors to find out how much waste your organisation generates and the cost.

For example, office paper purchasing records will indicate number of reams and cost per annum. Estimate the amount of paper retained in archived or distributed documents. Subtract this amount from the amount purchased to get an indication of your waste paper generation per year.

The accuracy of results is dependant on the availability and detail presented in your records, and does not include items purchased outside of administrative processes.

Visual Waste Assessment

A visual waste assessment involves inspecting waste bins and skips to estimate the volume of each waste type in the bin (e.g. 30% cardboard, 40% plastic, 10% timber and 20% general waste). Most offices have standard waste streams and this method is usually sufficient to determine waste generation and waste type.

A visual inspection will also identify the success of any existing recycling programs. For example, it is easily identify any cardboard and paper in the general waste that could be recovered through the recycling system.

One of the limitations of a visual assessment is that it doesn't allow for compaction of the waste, which impacts on the accuracy of results. However it is less time consuming than a physical waste audit where everything is weighed.

Physical waste audit

A physical waste audit requires physically sorting, weighing and recording contents of bins/skips into categories. This audit is applicable for organisations needing accurate information or where waste streams are diverse and hard to visually separate.

Either audit all bins, or a representative sample, depending on time and labour constraints. Usually audits represent a 'snapshot in time' therefore care needs to be taken in extrapolating this information to a yearly basis. Plan to do your audit at a time of year and using a sample that is a true representation of types and quantities of waste usually generated by your business. Take into account any factors that mean the amount or type is different from the norm.

Occupational health and safety precautions

Do not undertake a physical waste audit unless you have the appropriate protective equipment such as protective clothing, gloves and glasses. Be aware of needle stick injuries or glass cuts when handling waste, especially health care sector waste. However, sharps can be present in any waste stream.

It is also recommended that tetanus and hepatitis immunisations are up-to-date before undertaking any activity that requires physical handling of waste. Seek professional medical advice if required.

Physical Audit Checklist

Planning

<input type="checkbox"/>	Determine which and how many bins are to be audited
<input type="checkbox"/>	Decide the best time period e.g. daily or weekly accumulation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Talk to cleaning staff and waste/recycling contractors about the audit
<input type="checkbox"/>	To get a true generation of waste generation – audit waste and recycling bins where possible. (will also help determine the success of any recycling program)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ensure you have a cleanable, safe site to conduct the audit
<input type="checkbox"/>	Communicate audit time and place to all participants
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't tell general staff the time of the audit as they may change their normal behaviour

Equipment

<input type="checkbox"/>	First aid kit and access to phone in case of emergency
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recording sheets and pens (1 per bin/skip) and a folder to keep them safe
<input type="checkbox"/>	Camera to record interesting
<input type="checkbox"/>	Safety glasses, protective clothing, water resistance footwear and heavy duty gloves
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sharps container
<input type="checkbox"/>	Bin liners or containers to sort waste into
<input type="checkbox"/>	Paper and pens to label containers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Scales to weigh sorted waste categories
<input type="checkbox"/>	Groundsheet
<input type="checkbox"/>	Stick and tongs to rummage through waste. Do not handle the waste
<input type="checkbox"/>	Broom, mop and shovel for cleaning up
<input type="checkbox"/>	Disinfectant and water for cleaning

The audit

<input type="checkbox"/>	Nominate lead auditor
<input type="checkbox"/>	Make sure every one is aware of OHS risks and first aid kit
<input type="checkbox"/>	No smoking on site
<input type="checkbox"/>	Audit one bin at a time
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have one person be note taker/photographer who doesn't handle waste
<input type="checkbox"/>	Make sure units (kg/litres/volumes) and any other interesting factors are listed
<input type="checkbox"/>	Collate results on the Waste Assessment Sheet