

Sustainable = Good business: www.heraldtimesonline.com

Local firm works to translate green business practice onto the bottom line for businesses

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency honored him with an Excellence Award for his work to protect children from environmental threats.

Ashkin has started four businesses in Bloomington over the years. He's also executive director of the nonprofit Green Cleaning Network and co-founder of Green Cleaning University.

The company he founded in 2008, Sustainability Dashboard Tools LLC, operates in the Johnson Creamery Building, where software developers are working on an interface intended to help small businesses reduce waste, improve energy efficiency and generally operate in a more environmentally sensitive manner — often saving the company lots of money.

"I am very passionate and concerned about what's going on in this world," Ashkin said. "And so we want to do something about it."

Because he spends a lot of time consulting for mega-corporations, he knows that big business are developing tools to measure and track their sustainability efforts.

"But what concerns me enormously is what about the 97 percent of businesses that are considered small businesses in the United States? Who's trying to help them (operate more sustainably)? That's what we're trying to do."

His product recognizes that few small businesses can afford to hire sustainability experts, and might not know how about to improve energy efficiency, reduce water consumption or manage waste.

Sustainability Dashboard Tools aims to help such companies, and the software doesn't require a dedicated employee to enter the data. The office manager, the bookkeeper, even the business owner can use the program — easily and quickly.

"We want to make it easy for people like that to contribute to the solution to (environmental) problems," Ashkin said. "From a business perspective, we believe that if we can create value, from a sustainability perspective, when you help company prevent waste, it helps their productivity."

Ashkin said his software engages occupants of a building or employees of a business in decisions beyond energy and water consumption, including waste reduction, transportation-related impacts, internal consumables such as light bulbs and cleaning products, and other things they can control.

"Every day, organizations are going out and buying stuff. If we give people good information, they make more informed choices that can drive a greener marketplace," he said.

Ashkin believes that his company can make a profit from helping other companies operate more sustainably.

Caterpillar is one of the company's clients, Ashkin said, noting that his product was intended more for mom and pop operations.

He said the company has started pilot projects with Middleway House and Indiana University at the Hutton Honors College, but most of his customers aren't local.

"The only way that Bloomington will prosper in the future is to bring money in from outside," Ashkin said.

"Being able to create value here in Bloomington, especially with a clean company, creates enormous value for the city in many different ways," he said.

He said his company hopes to obtain a loan from Bloomington's department of economic development in order to expand the company, including expanding the office downtown, and hiring locally.

Sustainability Dashboard Tools employs about a dozen people: half are programmers, other half work on sales, customer service and accounting, Ashkin said.

Ashkin said his business has benefitted from proximity to IU. One of his partners in Sustainability Dashboard Tools is IU computer science professor Chris Haynes, and the company recently employed three interns who were grad students in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs, calling them "brilliant," and the "cream of the crop."

"It's been an outstanding resource for us," Ashkin said.

Find about more about Bloomington-born and based Sustainability Dashboard Tools at Green2sustainable.com.

Steve Ashkin, center, and his crew at Sustainability Dashboard Tool focus on translating good environmental practice into dollars, with small businesses particularly in mind. Working with him are, from left, Matt Haralovich, Cynthia Schultz, Elizabeth Crosbie and Nathan David Snodgrass | Herald-Times

