

Talking Trash at Work

Lily Ko

I wanted a job that would connect me to environmental change. But the job I found does not have any direct relation to the environment. At this point, you might be thinking, “You lose.” Indeed, it did feel like I had failed to connect my work life to an issue that I am deeply interested in—the environment. I racked my brains about this problem

for quite a while.

I think some folks believe there’s a magical trash-collection fairy that takes all of our garbage away... They need a dose of reality—we’re drowning ourselves in our own crap!

And now, a year later, I can say that I didn’t lose. Nothing like it. I realized that wherever you work, you can do something for the environment.

I decided to host an informal brainstorming session for people in-

terested in making our workplace more environmentally friendly. People came and shared their ideas and even volunteered for duties. Within weeks, we had started:

- Using plates, mugs, and utensils that we bought from Goodwill
- Replacing paper towels with cloth towels
- Encouraging double-sided printing
- A re-use box to hold papers that were printed only on one side

I was so proud of us. I came to realize that people really do care, but sometimes they just need reminders or simply someone to lead the way. As happy as I was with our changes though, it wasn’t enough. My biggest problem is with garbage. We are overwhelming ourselves with our own waste! I think some folks believe there’s a magical trash-collection fairy that takes all of

our garbage away and turns it into pixie dust somewhere. They need a dose of reality—we’re drowning ourselves in our own crap!

So, we started talking trash at work. We called a compost-collection service, discussed the idea of composting outside the building on our own, and considered taking the waste to a Whole Foods market that takes community compost. Unfortunately, for various reasons, we were left with hauling the compost ourselves.

So we did! Someone brought in a 5-liter, odor-free, stainless steel, carbon-filtered bin. I made a list of the waste we’d accept (raw fruits and veggies, tea bags, and coffee grounds and filters) and made a sign-up sheet for volunteers. The bin started filling up regularly, and one of us took the bin home weekly. By now, a year later, the sign-up sheet is gone, but the operation still runs itself.

Last week, my friend told me that she felt people our age were hopeless in terms of civic participation. I can’t completely disagree. However, my belief is that there’s no use turning things into a self-fulfilling prophecy. I have learned that I can make change wherever I am.

The story doesn’t end here. I finally got the motivation I needed to compost at home. Some of my co-workers have told me that they have started composting at home too. I’m pushing myself to learn more and do more in my own life and in all the different settings I come across. Over time, hopefully everyone will be doing more as well.

Don’t abandon all hope, planet Earth. We got you.



Lily Ko is a Research Assistant at TERC, a non-profit, education research and development center in Cambridge, MA.