

A Lasting Impact

as reported in the Independent newspaper on Tuesday 5th Feb 2008



Uly Ma tells Kate Hilpem how he set up an environmental consultancy that's helping the construction industry reduce waste and save money

A staggering 15 to 20 percent of all construction materials delivered to building sites end up in skips for disposal, resulting in over 100 million tons of waste to landfill sites. In a climate where environmentally-friendly business practices are not only in vogue, but often legally required, it's little wonder that the companies running such sites are increasingly turning to consultants to introduce sustainable waste reduction programmes.

But while most sustainability consultants are environmental specialists above all else, Greenfile Developments starts from a people and processes viewpoint. Uly Ma, principal consultant at Greenfile, explains: "Since sustainability is driven by environmental legislation, sustainability plans tend to be run by environmentalists, who don't necessarily have a full understanding of how businesses and people work outside an environmental context. They also tend to use a lot of environmental jargon and although management and front line workers are picking this up, it is still confusing."

Born in Hong Kong, Ma came to the UK in 1972 to do his O- and A-levels. Having gone onto do both a degree and PhD, he began to build up his portfolio through researching business methods in a variety of industrial companies. In 1990, he did an MBA "I came out of it when nobody really wanted consultants, though, so I wound up working for the Government, where I promoted training to encourage energy efficiency," he says. "Through that, I not only learned a lot about environmentalism, but about truly motivating people and getting them to engage with it."

In 1997, he decided to maximise his combination of skills by going it alone and setting up Greenfile. The aim, he explains, is not only to help companies reduce waste, but to save costs while doing it. "I'd become increasingly alarmed at the way in which, when companies talk about cost savings, they generally mean getting rid of people. But people are the ones who can help you save money through more sustainable solutions. Firing them is therefore not a good idea."

For the first few years of his new business, Ma admits it was mainly friends within other businesses that gave him work to keep him going and to help him build up his reputation. Today, however, his projects are award-winning. Most recently, Greenfile helped Bovis Lend Lease win the Waste Initiative of the Year Award at the Sustainability Awards, hosted by Building Magazine, for its "Project NoWaste" - a construction based project which was implemented at Unilever House in Blackfriars, London, among others. "I first developed the programme with Bovis Lend Lease back in 2004," says Ma. "The object is to help construction teams to identify root causes of waste, and provide the tools and training to reduce and manage waste more effectively."

To give the workers added incentive, the NoWaste project rewards workers for their efforts, for example through gift vouchers and putting their names up in lights. "At Unilever House, they have a really good canteen, so we offered free breakfast vouchers as a reward. At another site, free parking spaces worked as a better incentive. There's tons of scope," says Ma.



As part of the programme, construction workers can work towards gaining qualifications, adds Ma. "One Georgian worker got an NVQ and is now a supervisor."

Despite Ma's growing expertise in the construction industry, this is by no means the only sector in which he develops programmes. "I've worked in aerospace companies right through to industrial cake makers and the aim is always the same - engaging the manager and the workforce to work together to deliver sustainable solutions," he says.

Greenfile is not without its competitors, however. "Some of the really big consultancies have much more resources and people than we do and in that respect, we can't compete. But on the other hand, we don't charge as much as they do," says Ma, who teaches on the Masters on project management and consultancy skills at South Bank University and is due to publish a book on sustainability for construction.