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CLEANING UP: Encore Acquisition Co.'s Maria Nicholas found a way to improve their office's air quality with services from Corporate Floors, run by its President, Thomas Holland (left) and Vice President of Maintenance Services, John Davern (right).

Breathing easier

SOME COMPANIES ARE TAKING STEPS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE AIR
THEIR EMPLOYEES BREATHE IN THE WORKPLACE

BY LISA TANNER | STAFF WRITER

At Encore Acquisition Co. in Fort Worth, an action that most employees weren't even aware of has seemingly improved their health. That's because a change in the way the carpets are cleaned at the company's headquarters has improved the air quality of the workplace.

It's a small thing that produced big results.

Improved air quality has been cited by experts as one thing that can reduce sick days in the workplace and create a more productive employee base.

"The company is very proactive about the health of its employees," said Encore office manager Maria Nicholas. So, when she heard health complaints from employees ranging from sneezing and allergy symptoms to headaches, she decided to conduct a test.

She changed the company's system for carpet cleaning, but didn't tell the employees. Soon, there were noticeably fewer complaints.

Although the test is not scientific, the change did support the company's

AIR: *Reduce chemicals, humidity*

goal to make Encore Acquisition a healthy, safe and good place to work, she said. The company, an independent energy company, employs about 120.

'Green' program

The carpet cleaning switch is just one measure in place to improve indoor air quality. The effort includes everything from maintenance of the office greenery to having the upholstery on office chairs cleaned once a year.

It helps to have good building management that will promptly fix any problems with the heating, ventilation and air conditioning system.

"It's very much a team effort," Nicholas said.

To address the carpet cleaning issue, she brought in Corporate Floors, a Grapevine company. The cost was a bit more, but the company offers more service, she said.

The company offers a "green" solution, using a dry-polymer based carpet cleaning system that reduces allergens in the air and improves indoor air quality.

Corporate Floors, run by Thomas Holland, is an independently owned franchise operation of MilliCare, a commercial carpet and textile care operation that provides services to *Fortune* 500 companies, government agencies, airports, hotels and other public places. Other clients have included IBM, AT&T, EDS, Sprint, Verizon, Dallas Love Field and American Airlines Center.

Clients are concerned with presenting the best image for their company and want their carpets to look their best, Holland said. But they're also interested in safe and environmentally sound processes.

"People like to work in a clean environment," he said.

Indoor air quality is affected by many factors, from the use of cleaning products to the cologne that people wear. The operation of the HVAC system impacts air quality, as does the use of certain janitorial and paper products and other items used in an office.

The MilliCare system captures organic matter, such as sloughed off skin and loose dirt in the carpet. Then it's vacuumed. It's often a part of a bigger "green" program in place in a particular building, Holland said.

Growing concerns

The Environmental Protection Agency shows indoor air quality issues as one of the top five health concerns voiced by workers today. Indoor air quality is affected by concentrations of pollutants and other issues, such a humidity, that may affect the health and comfort of people who work or live in the space. Estimates of performance losses from poor indoor air quality for all buildings suggests a "2% to 4% loss on average," according to the EPA.

The issue has grown as more chemicals are used within buildings and as buildings are built tighter and with reduced ventilation.

Often, issues are best addressed with basic property management and maintenance strategies.

Larry Schoen is a member of the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers committee that developed indoor air quality standards adopted in building codes across the United States.

There is certainly more awareness about

indoor air quality issues now, said Schoen, principal with Schoen Engineering Inc., building services and engineering consultants in Columbia, Md.

Addressing moisture issues is often a key, which includes fixing roof leaks, investigating sources of condensation and even damp odors to find the root cause of the moisture.

Upgrading air filters, especially to ones rated by the American Society of Heating, Refrigeration and Air-Conditioning Engineers, will often help, without the expense of new equipment, he said.

Measurable changes in workers' ability to concentrate have been shown to result from small changes in temperature and relative humidity and recent studies suggest that the similar effects are associated with indoor pollution due to the lack of ventilation or the presence of pollution sources, according to the EPA.

"The key is to keep the building clean and dry, avoid sources on additional contamination such as smoking and get a bit of ventilation from the outside," Schoen said. Taking care when additional contaminants may arise, such as during sanding, painting or other types of renovation, will also help avoid issues. And just talking to people who have complaints about air quality issues is often a good way to get a handle on a problem.

Perhaps they have complaints in the fall, when leaves collect around air intakes or after heavy rains, which might point toward a leak in the building envelope.

"That's a good way to get to the root of the issue," he said.

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