Energy Efficiency Hacks to Implement During Building Vacancy

We are in unprecedented times so far in 2020. Many people are working from home and just as many landlords have empty or nearly empty buildings, some for the first time ever. While we can’t flip the breaker on the electrical panel for the whole building, we can complete other energy efficiency measures to reduce usage and costs for both landlords and tenants, while eliminating the risk of tenant disruptions during business hours.

Below are some action items you can implement to best manage your building during low or no occupancy, adapted from an article from the Urban Land Institute. Please click here for the full report.

HVAC
With air quality in mind, run HVAC and ventilation at a minimal level to keep mold out and ensuring that all mechanical systems are working. Operate the building automation system on a weekend or holiday schedule with wider temperature dead-bands, reduced hours, delayed startup, and lower setpoints

Lighting and Controls
Turn off non-essential lighting in tenant spaces and common areas.

Plug Load
Where appropriate, turn off and unplug appliances like monitors, printers, televisions, and kitchen equipment.

Leases
If necessary, communicate to tenants to get their approval on making changes to their space, and ensure operators can implement these energy reduction activities.

Energy Contracts
Be aware that some buildings have long-term contract agreements to pay for a minimum amount of energy even if they are not using it. Keep in mind that while it is still advantageous to act on energy efficiency projects, the minimum energy requirement in a long-term energy contract may hurt the return on investment (ROI) of certain energy-saving investments.

Essential Workers
Assuming that cleaning and security staff are still entering the building, ensure that the space is safe for them to work (even if it hinders energy performance).

Get a Head Start on Future Projects
If a property is not yet tracking and benchmarking its energy use over time, now is a good time to assess which facilities this would make sense for. Facility teams can collect one to two years of monthly utility bills and energy consumption data to understand the property’s baseline level of usage, and then measure the savings from implementing these operational efficiencies.

TESTIMONIAL
“We’ve implemented measures such as cycling air handler units only a few hours a day, adjusting set points, and walking vacant floors to confirm that only emergency lights are on, and [we] are actively working with our peers to share best practices to go further.”

Communicate with your Tenants

Now more than ever it’s imperative to focus on tenant-landlord communication. Tenants need to know what landlords are doing to maximize both energy efficiency and health & wellness in the property, if they are going to feel comfortable returning. For buildings that still have tenants occupying spaces, take these communications tips into account:

- Communicate with tenants to understand their new occupancy strategy and schedules to ensure building services match this new level of activity while keeping in mind both health & wellness and energy efficiency.
- Encourage a reduction in the use of tenant HVAC units, as appropriate.
- Encourage tenants to turn off lights and unplug equipment when not using the space.

Here is a customizable template you can use to communicate to your tenants on the energy efficiency actions you are taking in their space:

“Hello ____,

While we have all been adjusting to the changes in our society, we wanted to reassure you that your leased space is being maintained and even improved with energy efficiency and health & wellness projects while you are away. Here is an example of projects we have been working on in preparation for your return:

- HVAC – Keeping air quality in mind, we are running HVAC and ventilation at a minimal level to keep mold out and ensuring that all mechanical systems are in working order, while still saving energy. We are operating the building automation system on a weekend or holiday schedule with reduced hours, delayed startup, lower setpoints, and wider temperature dead-bands.
- Lighting and Controls – We are turning off non-essential lighting in tenant spaces and common areas.
- Plug Load – Where appropriate, we are turning off and unplugging appliances like monitors, printers, televisions, and kitchen equipment.
- Leases – Where necessary, we are communicating to tenants to get their approval on making changes to their space, and ensuring operators can implement these energy reduction activities.
- Essential Workers – We are ensuring the space is safe for cleaning and security staff that are still entering the building.
- Benchmarking – We started tracking and benchmarking the building’s energy consumption data to understand the baseline level of usage to measure the savings from implementing these operational efficiencies.”

Additional Resources

- Optimizing for Energy Efficiency during COVID-19, ULI - [link]
- ENERGY STAR COVID-19 Webinars on Water and HVAC – [link]
  - Maintaining and Restoring Water Quality in Buildings During the COVID-19 Response
  - Building HVAC Operations and COVID-19