Conducting a Waste Audit

What is a visual waste audit?

A visual waste audit assesses how much and what kinds of waste office members produce and whether they are sorting their waste into the correct streams, allowing your office to identify ongoing waste diversion challenges and opportunities for improvement.

Because it’s a visual waste audit, no special equipment is required and no one needs to get their hands dirty. While you will look at the contents of your office’s waste bins, you will not need to weigh their contents or open the bags.

The four main waste streams at the University of Calgary are:

1. **Mixed recycling**: materials that can be re-processed into new products when free from contaminants (i.e. paper, plastic containers with recycling symbol #1-7, stretchable plastic like cling film, tinfoil, cardboard)
2. **Refundable beverage containers**: beverage containers that can be cleaned and reused or reprocessed to make a new container (i.e.: milk cartons, Tetrapaks, plastic beverage bottles, aluminum cans)
3. **Compost**: food waste, organic materials and BPI-certified compostable items that will break down in a compost facility (i.e. compostable clamshells, coffee grounds, wooden chopsticks and stir sticks, paper napkins)
4. **Trash or landfill**: materials that cannot be reused or salvaged must go to the landfill (i.e. Styrofoam, composite packaging that mixes plastic and foil, disposable coffee cup lids)

What do you need?

- Audit sheet (see p. 3)
- Pencil
- Rubber gloves (optional)

How to conduct a visual waste audit

1. Identify high-traffic waste bins in and around your office space and select between one and five bins to audit.
   - **TIP**: Auditing trash bins helps you assess how many potentially recyclable or compostable items are currently going to landfill, while auditing recycling or compost bins lets you assess how much those streams are being contaminated by non-recyclable or -compostable items.

2. Look at the contents of each bin, estimating how many items belong to each waste stream (mixed recycling, refundable beverage containers, compost and trash). Take notes in the Visual Waste Audit Worksheet (p. 3).

3. Use the data you collect to identify your office’s main waste diversion challenges. Use the questions outlined in the Waste Audit Action Plan on p. 2 to set short- and long-term goals for your office.

**Safety First!**

Health and Safety Tips for Conducting a Visual Waste Audit

- Do not open bags of garbage or touch anything in the garbage or recycling bins. This is strictly a visual estimation of the waste contents of the bag.
- Wear gloves and make sure to wash your hands thoroughly after completing the waste audit.
Tips and tricks
  
  o If you are looking at a clear bag, try lifting it out of the waste bin to give you a closer look at the contents.
  
  o Try to identify:
    
    o Items from **all four waste streams** (mixed recyclables, refundable beverage containers, compost, trash)
    
    o Which items appear **most frequently** in your office’s waste bins?
    
    o Which items are most **frequently sorted into the wrong bins** in your office?

Waste Audit Action Plan

Work through the following steps with your colleagues to develop clear, attainable goals for waste reduction and/or diversion in your office.

1. **Have a discussion.** What are your office’s current strengths? Did you notice anything in your waste audit that you are proud of? Where do you see opportunities to reduce how much waste your office produces and/or to improve how your office sorts its waste?

2. **Use your audit results to set a waste diversion goal for your office.** If you noticed that a lot of food waste was being thrown in your office’s trash bins, for example, you could try to decrease the volume of compost in the trash by 10% by the time you conduct your next audit. When setting your goal, consider:
   
   o What does your office need to do to achieve this goal?
   
   o Which office members will need to be involved for you to be successful?
   
   o How long will it take your office to achieve this goal?
   
   o When will you conduct your next audit to measure your progress?

3. **Use your audit results to inform future education or outreach initiatives.** For example, if your waste audit shows that your office is throwing a lot of recyclable coffee cups in the trash, you could plan an initiative encouraging your colleagues to recycle them – or to drink out of a reusable mug instead.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waste Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Bin 1</th>
<th>Estimated %</th>
<th>Bin 2</th>
<th>Estimated %</th>
<th>Bin 3</th>
<th>Estimated %</th>
<th>Bin 4</th>
<th>Estimated %</th>
<th>Bin 5</th>
<th>Estimated %</th>
<th>Average % across all bins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compostables</td>
<td>(food waste, tea bags, coffee grounds and filters, compostable clamshells, wooden chopsticks/stir sticks)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refundable Beverage Containers</td>
<td>(plastic bottles, Tetrapaks, milk cartons, aluminum cans)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Recyclables</td>
<td>(coffee cups, paper, cardboard, aluminum foil, cling film, most plastics marked #1-7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landfill</td>
<td>(plastic straws, non-stretchable plastics, composite materials, coffee cup lids)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Recyclables</td>
<td>(e-waste, printer/toner cartridges, batteries)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refundable Beverage Containers</td>
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