

The Value-Add of a Utility for a Small Business

By: Colleen Keane, Senior Program Manager, National Grid

2020 marked a major sustainability milestone for businesses across the globe as many pledged to invest in renewable energy and provide for a healthier workplace as part of their goals for 2030—a trend spurred partly by the United Nations’ “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”

As we reflect on the many impressive strides made toward a more energy-efficient future and the challenges that still need to be addressed, an increasing number of small- to medium-sized businesses are considering what these measures could do for them.

While the spotlight has largely been on top corporations for their sustainability efforts, these dynamics are quickly evolving, and small businesses are beginning to realize the potential this has in building a strong competitive edge.

In fact, dynamic, growing organizations are increasingly taking energy-efficient measures to boost the performance of their workplaces. While collaboration toward a more sustainable future has become an expected norm, small businesses can also reap benefits from reduced operational and maintenance costs, increased comfort throughout the organization and, ultimately, a positive impact on the bottom line.

However, energy-efficiency initiatives are never one-size-fits-all, and when it comes to small businesses, having resources in place to navigate changing circumstances and unique business needs is critical. The impact of COVID-19 is one such example of the unpredictable circumstances that can drastically shift sustainability-related priorities.

Unlike major corporations, small businesses rarely have the in-house technical expertise needed to respond to these types of circumstances and identify energy-savings opportunities. This can make it exceptionally difficult and confusing for these organizations and, unfortunately, it’s a major reason why many businesses are hesitant to pursue these projects.



The impact of COVID-19 on small businesses can drastically shift sustainability-related priorities, but when ready, partnering with a utility can help identify energy-savings opportunities.



To help close this gap and enable businesses of all sizes to reap the benefits of energy efficiency, local utilities like National Grid can provide technical expertise tailored to each business to help navigate this new and uncertain terrain. From identifying the best cost-savings opportunities to more long-term sustainability goals, utility representatives are a valuable resource at any point of a small business' sustainability journey.

For new projects, a no-cost energy assessment can help identify energy-savings opportunities. For small businesses in particular, these assessments are an eye-opening opportunity to understand how energy is easily lost in the day-to-day operations that are often overlooked.

Based on a walkthrough, energy-savings project recommendations are made. Some of these projects may be as simple as changing light fixtures and making HVAC upgrades. Others may require more custom solutions involving facility-specific equipment. Regardless of the size of the project, these representatives can help determine the most valuable approach, whether the ultimate goal is to transform energy systems or to simply save on expenses during challenging economic times.

Take, for example, Tiny's Grill, a neighborhood staple in Utica, N.Y., which turned to its local utility to conduct an energy audit of all lighting systems at its restaurant for potential energy-saving upgrades. After consulting with the utility representative, it was recommended that energy-efficient interior and exterior LEDs be installed. Doing so helped Tiny's Grill save close to \$2,000 annually while improving the overall appearance of the restaurant.

The Town of Chester, N.Y., also leveraged its local utility to improve lighting across its 36,000-square-foot town hall. Leveraging the technical expertise of the utility representative, nearly 350 new LED bulbs were installed.

The town received close to \$10,000 in incentives from their local utility, and the installations helped them save close to \$6,000 annually. Furthermore, the new LED bulbs also came with some unexpected health benefits by reducing employee migraines triggered by the previous fluorescent lighting throughout the building.



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While these two examples are vastly different in scale, they demonstrate the flexibility of these programs to accommodate a broad range of needs from simple tweaks to much more complex and time-intensive projects. In a time where any operational savings can help keep a business afloat, even the smallest energy-savings opportunities should not be overlooked.

Furthermore, some of these projects that seem cost prohibitive actually have options and incentives available from utilities and governmental programs/organizations to help meet a small business budget and reap immediate paybacks and dividends on the bottom line.

All businesses—large and small—can be more sustainable. Despite challenges like COVID-19 that may arise unexpectedly, these businesses can still set and meet energy-efficiency goals. A utility partner can offer added value that can specifically help small businesses embrace energy efficiency as a means of improving business, regardless of what their current priorities and objectives may be.

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