

## THE GREEN PAGES

# Employers can encourage workers set up carpools



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How can my business make an environmental difference? What can I do to help my employees with today's commuter costs? How can I show staff appreciation without spending a lot of money?

All three questions have one answer: Start an office carpool.

Who hasn't thought of this while sitting in gridlock? The average American has 45 commuting minutes each day to sit and think about it. Let's look at some facts:

- The automobile is the single greatest air polluter in most cities across America.
- Congestion cost the Allentown/Bethlehem area \$137 million in 2005.
- Vehicular gasoline consumption accounts for 20 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.
- About 78 percent of commutes are in single-passenger vehicles.

An employer-sponsored carpool can be a dart in a green business bull's-eye. Couple that with a few HR facts:

- While no outside expense is required, few businesses in Eastern Pennsylvania are offering this free perk.
- Workers are leaving good jobs for less desirable ones closer to home.
- Carpooling coworkers rely on each other, creating incentives for promptness and reducing overtime costs.
- A typical commute costs nearly \$100 a

month in gas alone, and every commuter in our area loses 22 hours a year due to congestion.

During the war years of the 1940s, carpools were encouraged as a citizen conservation effort. The '60s-style environmental movement turned carpool into a verb. In the 1970s, a gas crunch brought an increase in incentives once again. The pattern correlates carpooling with a military crisis or a large-scale environmental concern, and today we've got both.

## How to begin

Begin by surveying your staff. This can be as simple as a company-wide email stating, "Hey, we're thinking of starting a carpool. Interested?" Or better yet, schedule a meeting to communicate the mission with a positive spin. Americans are creatures of routine and cherishers of freedom and convenience. Be sure to illustrate how carpooling can help us reduce pollution while saving some serious cash.

Find a leader. Ask if someone wants to take the coordinating role. You might find a passionate recruit to spearhead the initiative.

Tap into your human resources personnel. They are best-equipped to offer company-wide incentives and are the authority on potential issues like lateness, grievances, or scheduling conflicts.

Develop a sign-up method. Post and maintain a list that includes a city of residence, current route, and work schedule. Or take advantage of online computer-matching databases such as [www.eRideShare.com](http://www.eRideShare.com) or even Craigslist. If you live or drive in Bucks and Montgomery counties, check out the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission's Share-a-Ride program via the links at [www.dvrpc.org](http://www.dvrpc.org). One great registration benefit is their Emergency Ride Home safety net. Restrictions apply, so carefully review the information. Research other local options, but beware of scams that require a fee.

Be flexible when possible on rules such as tardiness to show a willingness to work through inevitable glitches.

Offer guidance. Provide a framework for discussion on such nuances as eating in the car, smoking, reckless driving, and the driver's compensation. Encourage participants to review their auto insurance policies. Develop a game plan for handling emergency absences.

Offer incentives such as special parking spots, prizes, or recognition.

Publicize the campaign internally. Try [www.ItAllAddsUp.gov](http://www.ItAllAddsUp.gov) for ideas.

Publicize the campaign externally. The Best Workplaces for Commuters Program ([www.bestworkplaces.org](http://www.bestworkplaces.org)) is an untapped public relations resource. Presently there are no Lehigh Valley businesses on the list.

Provide an exit plan. Not every arrangement will work. Participants are more likely to give it a try if they know there is a simple way out.

Jodie Ritto, an assistant librarian, summarized it well when she said, "If the school district helped organize carpooling, I think more people would participate. At this time, not everyone knows where their colleagues live, and they could get hooked up with their neighbors."

Sometimes, offering leadership on the issue is all it takes, and simply promoting and supporting the idea may be enough to jumpstart a program. Depending on your location, additional alternative transportation options are available. These include vanpools or transportation vouchers. Contact your local transportation management association for more information.

With a few ground rules, a buy in from the office leadership, and an organized effort to make it work, carpooling is no longer a good idea; it's a survival requirement.

Americans' priorities have changed, and the convenience of free-willed driving is no longer at the top of the list. We excel when our private sector comes up with solutions. Be recognized as a leader in the reduction of greenhouse gases by starting a carpool today.

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