

You're a *what?*

Recycling coordinator

It's 6 a.m. Sunday, and Joanne Shafer is at Penn State's Beaver Stadium. She's helping to count recyclables from the football game the day before, one of many tasks she manages as a recycling coordinator for Centre County, Pennsylvania. "We have a good recycling program here, and we wanted to know how much was collected," she says.

Weekend mornings at football stadiums might not seem like an obvious time and place to find recycling coordinators, but being adaptable is part of their job. Joanne knows this firsthand, because she has seen the work evolve in her nearly two decades on the job. "Over the past 20 years in the field," says Joanne, "I've had the opportunity to watch this develop as a career path."

Recycling coordinators supervise curbside and dropoff recycling programs for municipal governments or private firms. Today, recycling is mandatory in many communities. And advancements in collection and processing methods have helped to increase the quantity of materials for which the recycling coordinator is responsible.

In some communities, including Joanne's, consumers presort their recyclable materials before the materials are sent to a transfer station or processing facility. In others, all recyclables are collected together and then are sorted at the facility. Both types of processing facilities prepare the sorted materials for shipment to the paper mills, glass plants, and other companies that create new products from recyclables.

The movement from consumer to company is what makes recycling a reality. After all, explains Joanne, "a product hasn't been recycled unless a new product has been made



from it." Recycling coordinators spend time on the computer or the telephone arranging to sell commodities, such as paper or aluminum, to brokers and firms.

Many types of materials can be recycled. In addition to paper, glass, plastics, and metals, for example, construction materials, cell phones, and printer cartridges can all be collected for reuse. Joanne also helps coordinate collection of hazardous waste by organizing special collection days and making the public aware of them.

In fact, community outreach is an important part of a recycling coordinator's job. Joanne speaks about recycling to local groups, such as the Girl Scouts or Rotary Club, and

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works with businesses to do waste assessments and to train employees about proper recycling methods. “I’ve worked with everyone from preschoolers to the elderly,” she says. “It helps to relate what you do to the big picture. I can show people that we removed the equivalent of 68,000 cars from the road or saved enough energy to power 28,000 households.”

As a recycling coordinator, Joanne is responsible for about 60 employees who collect recyclables and run the recycling processing facility in her county. Her personnel duties include coordinating collection schedules and assigning workers to the pickup routes.

Each recycling coordinator’s job is a little different, depending on the size of the program he or she oversees. A coordinator in charge of a small program, for example, might go out on a recycling truck for collection or operate a forklift in the processing facility. Recycling coordinators for large programs perform more administrative duties, such as managing contracts and budgets.

Data management skills, including the use of basic software programs, come in handy for administrative tasks. Coordinators evaluate the success of their program by analyzing information ranging from recycling rates to financial stability.

Communication skills are essential. In addition to speaking to the public, recycling coordinators create brochures and marketing material and write grant proposals, reports, and other documents, such as employee handbooks. Joanne also writes requests for proposals to hire specially trained contractors who can help handle and transport hazardous waste.

Requirements for becoming a recycling coordinator have changed in the two decades since Joanne started. Joanne doesn’t have a college degree, and her background is in hotel, restaurant, and institutional management. But most entry-level recycling coordinators today need at least a bachelor’s degree in a field related to recycling, such as environmental resources management or environmental education. In some States, such as New Jersey,



recycling coordinators must be certified; in others, optional certification is available.

Work experience is also important for recycling coordinators. Jobs in municipal government, manufacturing, education, personnel management, or marketing provide good preparation. Volunteer or internship experience with a local recycling program or private waste management company is another way to gain practical knowledge.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect employment or wage data for recycling coordinators. In 2009, first line supervisors/managers of helpers, laborers, and material movers (the occupational title under which recycling coordinators falls) earned a median annual wage of \$42,940. Anecdotal evidence suggests that annual earnings for recycling coordinators range from the low \$30,000s to as much as \$100,000, depending on a recycling program’s size, the worker’s experience, and other factors.

For recycling coordinators, the passion for what they do is often a greater reward than the paycheck they get for doing it. “I have the opportunity to do something that makes a difference,” says Joanne. “I love watching fifth graders come in and say, ‘That’s cool. I’ll tell my mom not to throw that out.’ And then to tie it in with reducing greenhouse gas production—that’s very important to me.”

Opposite page, Joanne Shafer examines materials for recycling. Above, she discusses program details with a local citizen.

