

Wisdom from the Garbage Man: Does Working in Waste Management Affect Wastefulness?

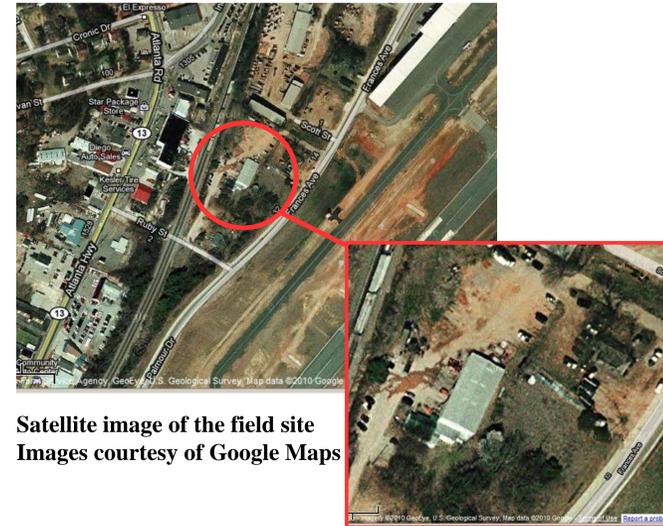
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Abstract

I believe that direct involvement in waste management lessens the amount of waste an individual produces. This research tests this hypothesis. Wastefulness is not an option in many traditional societies, as they must find ways to deal with all the refuse they produce. Because most Americans are oblivious to how solid waste is dealt with (to most, it just seems to magically disappear each week from their curbs), a better understanding of waste management processes and issues will help raise the consciousness level of the general public on these issues and may lessen wastefulness in American society. As an exploratory case study, this project selected participants through convenience sampling. Several interviews were conducted, as well as direct field observations at waste management companies over the course of three months. Although this project is limited in scope due to the constraints of time and resources, the resulting data preliminarily supports the hypothesis that working in waste management alters one's behavior, making him or her less wasteful. Further research in this area will help to demonstrate new avenues for education similar to the garbology program already underway in Ohio. Through continued research and public education about waste and waste management, industrial and urban communities will better understand their roles and personal responsibilities to create less garbage.



Findings

The main theme to be explored in this paper is of course that working in waste management affects an individual's viewpoint on wastefulness and environmental concerns about solid waste. Another important theme was education on solid waste management. I found that while one of my key consultants had changed his opinions on recycling and wastefulness (and even changed his personal habits) since working in waste management, another had not changed at all (the less experienced worker). He stated, "Oh no, littering doesn't bother me... 'cause when I'm at work I'll pick paper that's fallen out of the bin 'cause that's my job, but as soon as I'm done with work... I don't even take the trash out when I'm at my house" (04/02/2010). This led me to believe that more experience leads to greater understanding of the impacts wastefulness can have. The other key consultant said, "People just threw things out the window, especially aluminum cans. 'Oh, someone will pick that up.' Or if you're in a grocery store parking lot, 'Well, they pay people to clean that up.' But if the wind blows that piece of trash across the street and it winds up on the side of the road, then you have to look at it. So, my attitude toward littering has changed a ton since I've been in the business" (04/06/2010). Early education about waste management also seemed important, especially hands-on exercises and field trips to a landfill. My key informant that had more experience in the field said, "It's education on the kids. You take your kids, your kindergarteners, first, and second graders, and don't just make a big thing about 'Oh, you need to recycle. You need to not litter.' I mean, that's wonderful, but you need to teach them, and take the parents and show them..." (04/06/2010).

Methods

I used non-probability sampling in this research. Being that this is an exploratory case study, I feel non-probability sampling fit the project best. Three key consultants were used as interviewees for semi-structured interviewing. My key consultants were selected purposively; two of them work in waste management, and one is the daughter of a person working in waste management. One of the workers had only a couple of years experience in waste management working as a driver, while the other had been working in the field for 12 years, and works as an account manager. My field site was a local independently owned waste management company. Participant observation and pure observation were also done by convenience, as I could not allocate the time to do true probability sampling for all times during the workday. I was able to get a varied sample by visiting my site not only during the normal nine to five business day, but also on a weekend and early in the morning (5 AM). By doing this I was able to see more of what actually went on at the company I was observing, and not just what was going on at a time when a customer might visit.

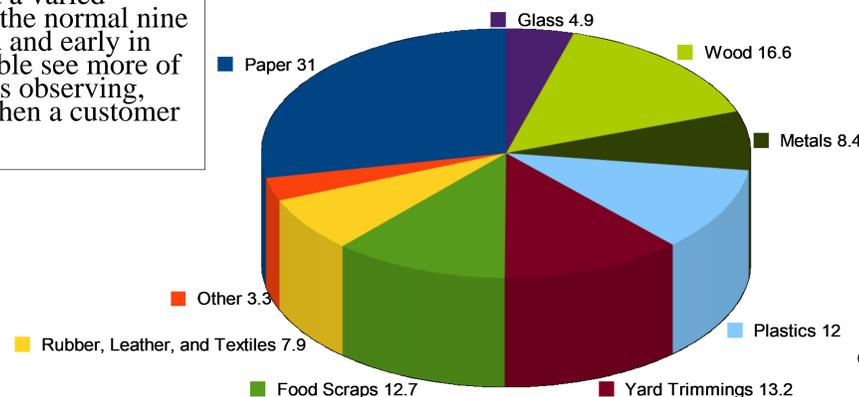


Conclusion

Working in waste management can change a person's recycling and trash output, but not in all cases. Judging by the key informants in this study, it would seem that people with a longer work history in waste disposal and management experience are more likely to have actually changed than someone with less experience that works in a hands-on position. In the future, there should be more early education about waste management, such as the Garbology project currently being used in Ohio (Smith 2008), and similar programs at the college level (Dowell 2006). The public would also benefit from raised awareness on the effects of wastefulness and what can be done to reduce garbage output (such as recycling).

Total MSW generation (by material) 2008, 250 million tons (before recycling)

EPA Municipal Solid Waste Generation: Facts and Figures for 2008



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