

Environmental program helps companies save energy

June 15 2009, By Tracy Seipel, San Jose Mercury News

The first time Sarah Shapiro walked into a Cisco Systems lab filled with racks of blinking routers and miles of multicolored electrical wires, she felt like she was on a movie set.

The labs _ 1,500 worldwide _ are where Cisco tests its hardware and software and where Shapiro will spend much of the next two months figuring out ways the San Jose networking company can reduce energy and save money.

That's her assignment as an intern in a program that pairs top graduate business school students with companies to help implement energy efficiencies.

Called the Climate Corps, the 2-year-old program of the Environmental Defense Fund has tripled in size this year, with 160 applicants vying for 26 internships at 23 companies across the country. California companies Accenture, Advanced Micro Devices, [eBay](#), Hewlett-Packard, Intuit, Salesforce.com and Shorenstein Realty Services also are hosting interns.

"We're really helping to create the next generation of business leaders who will automatically look at the environment as a business opportunity," said Elizabeth Sturcken, managing director of corporate partnerships at EDF.

Some companies, like Cisco, already have sophisticated energy efficiency programs. But for interns at smaller companies, even tackling

low-hanging fruit _ retrofitting lighting, installing motion light sensors or turning off computers and other electricity hogs when not in use _ makes an impact.

According to EDF, last year's class of seven MBAs helped identify efficiencies in lighting, computer equipment, and heating and cooling systems that could save a total of \$35 million in net costs over five years, cut 120 million kilowatt-hours of electricity per year, and reduce more than 57,000 tons of [greenhouse gas](#).

Like many in the program, Shapiro doesn't have experience in energy efficiency. But most interns have some related background, such as corporate social responsibility or sustainability. Shapiro worked on [climate change](#) policies at an East Coast consulting firm.

"They come from the top business schools in the country, which means they have proven leadership and analytic skills, and then we fill in the gaps," said Gwen Ruta, EDF's vice president of corporate partnerships. Interns are given a three-day crash course by energy professionals.

Key to the Climate Corps' success is that each intern is paired up with a mentor at the host company _ a data center or facilities manager, for example. Together, they review the company's energy profile, with the mentor giving the intern the resources to build a business case for operational change. Each intern earns \$10,000 for their 10-week effort, paid by the company.

For the past three weeks, Shapiro has been working alongside John Hailey, a senior manager in Cisco's sustainable development group. As Shapiro put it: "He's driving the ship, and I'm helping to steer."

She is following in the footsteps of Climate Corps alum Emily Reyna. Together with Hailey and other Cisco employees last summer, Reyna

worked on a project involving a new energy-saving device for equipment in R&D labs.

"I really feel lucky to be here," said Shapiro, 25, who is enrolled in a dual-degree master's program in business and natural resources at the University of Michigan. "I have climate change policy experience, but I really wanted some hands-on operational training."

Shapiro's task this summer is to help test the energy-saving devices at six Cisco pilot labs. The devices, dubbed power distribution units, can tell Cisco how much power its test hardware and software are using at any given time. Shutting down routers when not in use would save a lot of energy. And because the routers heat up, requiring constant injection of cold air to cool them, turning off unused routers would reduce Cisco's air conditioning bill.

For Shapiro, all of this means spending time working inside labs filled with rows of near-ceiling-high racks of routers that resemble stacks of DVD players. "I'd never been in a data lab before," she said, laughing. "Now I can speak somewhat eloquently about them."

The Climate Corps was hatched by EDF's Ruta and Silicon Valley tech marketing veteran Kirk Cruikshank while trying to figure out how to improve corporate energy efficiency. Cruikshank _ a proud Prius owner and solar panel homeowner _ told Ruta that for many executives, "there's only so many fires you can fight in one day." Worrying about product development, market share and making a profit are most companies' top priorities.

But what if there was a way to give a CEO a return on investment, Ruta wondered. What if young people with passion and smarts walked into a company, reviewed its energy bills, came back with a plan to help lower energy costs and reduce the company's carbon footprint?

"They (EDF) took it and ran with it," Cruikshank said.

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Citation: Environmental program helps companies save energy (2009, June 15) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-06-environmental-companies-energy.html>

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