

LEED for Commercial Interiors: An Inside Look

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These days, most people have heard of LEED: the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design green building rating system. Managed under the auspices of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), the LEED certification process serves primarily as a measurement tool, designed to gauge and foster sustainability in the building and design of facilities.

Those companies that choose to seek LEED certification during the building or renovation process do so for the benefits that certification brings...benefits that range from financial (e.g., energy savings) to improved corporate goodwill and employee well-being. One of the first steps in the certification process is deciding which LEED rating system to certify under: There are a variety of systems available based on the type of project, including LEED for New Construction, LEED Existing Buildings and LEED Core & Shell.

There is however, one rating system that has been the subject of misunderstanding: LEED for Commercial Interiors, also known as LEED-CI. Because most of the LEED rating systems were designed to control both external and internal components, LEED-CI was created to enable tenants in office, retail and institutional buildings the ability to achieve LEED certification for the portion of the interior environment that they do control. Without LEED-CI, these tenants who wish to take advantage of the benefits of becoming LEED certified would be unable to do so.

Perhaps due to the internal focus of LEED-CI, a misconception has sprung up throughout the industry that LEED-CI certification can be earned just by adding new finishes such as carpet with recycled contents, or paint, making it the “easy to obtain” certification rating system. One reason for the misunderstanding is the profusion of vendors who claim that their product is LEED certified and simply by using it, a facility can be LEED certified. While sustainable products can contribute to the earning of points for LEED certification, only buildings can be LEED certified – not products or people. As with all LEED rating systems, there is a real process that must be followed. In this manner, LEED-CI is no different than all other LEED systems. It encompasses Sustainable Sites (SS), Water Efficiency (WE), Indoor Environmental Quality (IEQ), Energy and Atmosphere (EA), Materials and Resources (MR), and Innovation in Design (ID).

Understanding LEED-CI

If we think about the fact that we spend most of our time indoors, either at home or in some building, it is easy to understand why we would want to create spaces that give us a more healthy environment through better indoor air quality, improved personal comfort for temperature and lighting, and, at the same time, reduce energy consumption.

As mentioned, LEED-CI is the rating system that is focused on internal elements and designed primarily for tenants of buildings whose control over their space is primarily limited to portions of the interior of the facility. LEED-CI enables tenants and designers to work within the confines of a building's interior, encouraging spaces that are healthy for both its occupants and the environment. LEED-CI covers all interior elements such as floors and walls, finishes, lighting, furniture, mechanical systems and individual comfort.



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Breaking Down the Points

Recently, the USGBC began implementing changes to all of the LEED certification rating systems, including LEED-CI. Released in March 2009, version 3 of LEED-CI requires commercial and institutional facilities to achieve additional points to earn certification, up to a total of 100. (Retail and healthcare facilities, as well as residences, are to be addressed at a later date.) Further demonstrating that LEED-CI is not just about finishes, of the 100 points, the majority of points (37) can be earned for Energy and Atmosphere improvements, while only 14 are given out for improvements in the Materials and Resources category. The remaining points can be earned in the categories of Sustainable Sites (21 total points), Water Efficiency (11 total points), and Indoor Environmental Quality (17 total points). For those companies that choose to apply for LEED certification, the process now requires companies to earn points at the following levels:

- Certified: 40-49 points
- Silver: 50 – 59 points
- Gold: 60 – 79 points
- Platinum: 80 points and above

Finding Innovation in LEED-CI

Innovation is something that goes beyond the scope of any LEED certification process but can also help boost your total point score. In every LEED rating system, there will be items that are not addressed that can add to your score. These items fall into the Innovation in Design (ID) category. By applying some creativity, you can secure additional points towards achieving certification – and all of the inherent benefits that go along with it.

For the LEED-CI rating system, examples of items that may assist with securing innovation points include:

- Adding plants to the work environment. Plants are not currently addressed by LEED-CI.
- Using environmentally friendly cleaning products and/or employing sustainable practices in the disposal of cleaning products.
- Developing a transportation management plan (e.g., hosting a regional carpool with personalized match lists).
- Implementing a carbon neutral office. For example, tracking office electricity, natural gas and other carbon-emitting sources and off-setting those emissions with renewable energy credits (RECs).
- Implementing an office space material and equipment recycling program to reduce the amount of material from the previously leased space that goes to the landfill. Other recycling ideas include implementing an in-house green program featuring composting, leftover food donations and customer recycling areas.
- Remediating and cleaning all existing supply and return ducts to ensure appropriate indoor air quality.

NOTE: You can go beyond what is already approved. Green cleaning, for example, is approved under LEED for Existing Buildings but not LEED-CI. But, there is no reason why green cleaning materials cannot be considered for an innovation point under LEED-CI.

In addition, one could take an ergonomics strategy further by providing a measurement of improvement. This could make a significant change in employee absences, ergonomic complaints, doctor visits, etc. The intent of such a strategy is “to create and maintain a flexible ergonomic environment that properly accommodates building users and promotes healthy, comfortable and productive work.” Requirements include development and implementing a strategy that has positive impact on human health and comfort.



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Going Local

New to LEED-CI version 3, Regional Priority (RP) is another avenue that can help deliver points to a LEED-CI certification effort. Regionalism is the ability to use the advantages of your locale while protecting the resources special to your area. Through this concept, local USGBC councils and chapters will identify six credits in the LEED-CI system that is of special import to that area. According to USGBC, "each regional priority credit is worth an additional point, and a total of four regional priority points may be earned."

Moving Forward

It is important to reiterate that there is no mandate – governmental or otherwise – that requires a company to seek USGBC LEED certification. The benefits of achieving certification (e.g., corporate goodwill, energy savings, a healthy workplace, and doing the right thing) must be weighed against the costs required to do so. However, should certification become a goal for your company, realize that all LEED rating systems, including LEED-CI, will require tough decisions and very real work. In the end, you will accomplish something that your company, employees and customers can be proud of.

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