

In With the New, ? With the Old

Upgrading to the latest technology can improve efficiency and enhance productivity for both companies and individual employees. Among the challenges, however, is what to do with the older equipment being replaced.

BizVoice® has been following this important issue since a March/April 2005 article. Subsequent coverage has outlined legislative and industry changes regarding electronic waste. The environmentally harmful nature of discarded electronics, especially those containing screens, is well established. Materials such as lead, mercury and chromium found in computers, televisions and cell phones are of primary concern.

Americans are expected to dispose of 550 million televisions and computer monitors, containing thousands of tons of lead, over the next three years alone. The vast majority of industry leaders and state legislatures agree that recycling or environmentally friendly disposal of these products is necessary and proper. Consensus on recycling methods and funding is another story.

Several states, including Washington and Maine, have enacted “take-back” laws requiring manufacturers to accept used electronics from consumers. With this acceptance comes the EPA-regulated burden of responsible disposal. There are currently 19 other states considering similar legislation.

Industry viewpoint

“It ought to be the responsibility of the consumer to manage the end of life of a product,” concludes Dave Arland, vice president of government relations for Thomson Consumer Electronics (owner of the RCA brand).

Arland represents the view of many industry manufacturers that a forced “take-back” system is the worst case scenario. This group would prefer an advanced recovery fee, applied at the point of sale, to cover the expense of electronic disposal through state government programs. Hewlett-Packard, which has incorporated reuse into its business practice and developed an in-house recycling infrastructure over many years, is one exception.

For Thomson and other manufacturers, what to do with electronic waste is a question of feasibility and fairness. “Simply pointing to manufacturing responsibility is not enough,” Arland argues. “There is no system in place for large-scale electronic recycling and forcing manufacturers to develop one will increase consumer prices.” He also points to difficulty in forming a set of recycling standards given the vastly different end of life treatment of various electronic products. One example is consumers’ tendencies to discard televisions while opting to reconfigure or donate computers.

Business participation

Manufacturers’ responsibility is just one part of the electronic recycling equation. Businesses also play an important role and have attracted the focus of the Indiana Recycling Coalition’s (IRC) e-Scrap program.

“There are things businesses can do beyond the law that are simply good business practices and demonstrate environmental

friendliness at the same time,” suggests Julie L. Rhodes, contracted by IRC to operate e-Scrap Indiana.

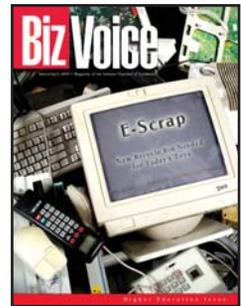
Current EPA rules classify any organization discarding more than 220 pounds of electronic waste per month as a hazardous material generator. Businesses or individuals generating less than this amount are legally exempt from following hazardous materials processes.

Rhodes explains that many exempt organizations choose to recycle rather than risk developing a reputation as a polluter. She offers the e-Scrap Indiana web site (www.escrapindiana.org) as a resource for finding reputable third party companies to manage outgoing electronic equipment.

As information for this article was being compiled, the Indiana Chamber had some electronic waste (cell phones, PDAs, computers, phones) of its own. This provided a perfect opportunity to ascertain the level of difficulty in disposing of such material in an environmentally friendly and business efficient manner. Three companies, all offering electronic recycling and disposal, were contacted for a bid. Only one company returned our calls during the three business days following the request. The company was helpful and met our needs.

The Chamber’s unscientific experiment indicates that finding a responsible third party recycling company is possible. but not as easy as many organizations would like. Arland and Rhodes echo different perspectives, but agree that ease of use is necessary for electronic recycling to succeed.

To view the March/April 2005 BizVoice® article on electronic waste, go to the archives section of www.bizvoicemagazine.com



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Story by Jonathan Wales



Collecting electronics for recycling is a growing industry throughout Indiana and the entire country.