

Eco-Friendly Equipment Disposal

Whether It's Being Repurposed Or Recycled, Make Sure Your Old Equipment Is Handled Responsibly

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by Robyn Weisman



Green IT as a buzzword has been around for several years, but as a concept it has become almost a distraction, at least when used in context of IT equipment disposal. “More often than not, companies have started to be green because they recognize it can help the bottom line in a lot of different ways,” says Josh Goldowitz, professor and program chair for Environmental Sustainability Health & Safety at Rochester Institute of Technology. “Improper disposal leaves a company open to all sorts of liability issues.”

Many of these liability issues revolve around data protection. Environmentally, however, failure to properly get rid of your old and obsolete IT assets can also lead to criminal and civil litigation. “If [company X] disposes of its equipment using an unscrupulous recycler—someone who takes their money and says, ‘Yes, we’re going to dispose of this in a proper way’ and then ends up dumping that equipment someplace—company X is criminally responsible,” Goldowitz says.

Given that ignorance and gullibility are, at best, ineffective legal arguments, what strategy should the average SME take when it’s time to discard outdated equipment in a safe and environmentally friendly manner? Here are some tips to get you started.

■ Consider The Three Rs: Repair, Refurbish & Reuse

Before you retire that outdated server, ask yourself if it can be repurposed for another task before you put it in the recycle pile, says Bob Houghton, CEO at technology change management solutions provider Redemtech (www.redemtech.com). “Even if you’re going to be

Key Points

- Look at reuse options for your equipment before recycling it.
- Vet potential recycling vendors by visiting them onsite, demanding detailed audits of their downstream vendors, getting proof of liability insurance, and interviewing at least three references.
- Make sure that vendors are ISO-certified and are also certified with the EPA’s R2 program or BAN’s e-Stewards standards—preferably both.

putting in all new equipment, you will have occasional needs for [things like] disaster recovery spares, spare parts, and project-related hardware,” Houghton says.

Houghton gives several scenarios where using a quality piece of used equipment that has been tested and perhaps refurbished is a greener and more cost-savvy option than buying new hardware. “If you’re operating a retail organization, many times, a server that no longer quite has the power to work in the data center is appropriate for use as a backroom server in a retail location as part of a PoS system. Workgroups may need to have access to a server for a particular development project [that requires] a Web server for whatever reason. And companies that need a disaster recovery or business continuity plan can use [older hardware] to set up a cold site so that they can still do business if their primary data center is wrecked,” he says.

■ Vet Potential Recycling Vendors

Houghton says that the average enterprise naturally assumes that recycling vendors will ground up old equipment and recycle it just like glass bottles and soda cans. Unfortunately, too many vendors equate recycling with shipping e-waste overseas, where materials are then salvaged in unhealthy and environmentally damaging ways. “The real crux of the problem is [making sure] the recycler does what it says it will do,” says Houghton.

But how do you verify this? John Shegerian, CEO of Electronics Recyclers International (www.electronicrecyclers.com), offers several tips to help you vet potential recycling vendors. First off, Shegerian urges that you visit the physical facility of a potential vendor and do an onsite audit. “If a place says it is recycling 1 million pounds of electronics every month, and in that facility, only two people are on the forklift, that’s a great way of vetting out the charlatans,” Shegerian says.

Next, get third-party environmental audit packages for every downstream vendor the recycler uses. “Where are they sending their glass, plastic, and metals to, for example? Just giving a list of [downstream] vendors is not sufficient,” Shegerian says.

In addition, Shegerian recommends you ask potential vendors the amount of liability insurance they carry and insist that they produce a current liability insurance certificate that proves it. “You should shoot minimally for \$5 million and ideally for \$10 million because as an IT manager, you’re selling peace of mind to your boss and to your clients, and that peace of mind includes making sure that you choose a recycler that believes in their processes and procedures enough that they have the right types of liability insurance,” Shegerian says.

Finally, ask potential vendors for a minimum of three client references that you may contact to make sure everything squares up. Shegerian adds that these references should come from IT, chief sustainability, or CEO-level employees.

■ Make Sure Your Chosen Vendor Is Certified

According to Shegerian, ISO 14001 certification (www.iso.org) should be a pro forma requirement of e-waste recyclers, along with certification with the EPA's R2 standards (www.epa.gov) and/or Basel Action Network's recently released e-Stewards standards (www.e-stewards.org).

For his part, Redemtech's Houghton feels that the R2 standard is not rigorous enough to guarantee responsible and environmentally sound e-waste recycling practices. Houghton says the R2 standard fails to ban export of toxic e-waste to developing countries and its reuse provision has too many loopholes to ensure that nonworking equipment isn't exported as reusable or refurbishable equipment, among many other problems relating to landfills and worker health and safety.

Unlike the EPA R2 standard, the e-Stewards standard has been developed under the auspices of BAN (Basel Action Network), a third-party non-governmental organization that has been campaigning for many years to eliminate e-waste exports to developing countries. Not only does the e-Stewards standard apply to recyclers, it has the backing of major corporations that have committed themselves to using only vendors certified as e-Stewards to manage their e-waste, Houghton explains. ■

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