

Why the UK WEEE directive is not viable

Although the WEEE directive was signed four years ago and an updated version is expected by 2008, IT reprocessing specialist, the CKS Group, believes that the UK government has let down its IT industry. *Geraldine Faulkner* finds out why.

THE FIRST thing you notice when you arrive at the CKS Group's facility based at Rushden near Wellingborough is how clean it is. The place is spotless and just about as far removed from your archetypal waste treatment facility as can be possible. Of course as a specialist in recycling and remarketing IT equipment and WEEE compliant electronics recycling, the group is the first to point out that it is not a run-of-the-mill waste disposal company.

"Within this facility, we focus on meeting the needs of business users, who are driven by a desire to see a return on their redundant assets," explains David Sutcliffe, CKS's sales director. "To fully realise those returns we need to treat everything that arrives at our door as an asset rather than waste, and to understand the potential value in those assets requires every senior manager in the company to have an IT and electronics background, rather than a waste management background."

The group's involvement with WEEE has been a quick but natural progression. Initially CKS was involved in the supply, refurbishment and maintenance of high-end audio-visual equipment. The main corporate customer at the time, Nationwide Building Society, suggested that the service be expanded to cover their desktop IT assets.

"When you first think about it there is a lot in common between display and computer technology," recalls Mr Sutcliffe. "However, from the outset we were struck by the significance of the role computers had as a platform for corporate and private data. The electronics may be similar, but addressing the confidentiality needs of business users was our primary concern."

"Without effective data deletion options reprocessing for resale simply wasn't a viable solution. Further, data deletion methods needed to be backed up with detailed audit trails and insurance to indemnify customers against future claims."

The demand for specialists such as CKS who recover value from redundant equipment is huge and growing all the time. Its Rushden facility alone processes over 120,000 systems a year, 75% of which enjoy a second or even third life in use.

Nor can there be any doubt about the need for companies with their expertise.

A year after CKS started trading in 1997, it was estimated that of the six million tonnes of electrical equipment waste arising in Europe the potential loss of resource comprised 2.4 million tonnes of ferrous metal; 1.2 million tonnes of plastic; 652,000 tonnes of copper; 336,000 tonnes of aluminium and 336,000 tonnes of glass.

"We already have plans to increase capacity, concentrated mainly on Category 3 WEEE. Further, our upstream operations are also set to grow and we have already secured planning permission for an expansion of our facility at Rushden," says Mr Sutcliffe.



The CKS group believes there is has been a lack of guidance from the UK government on businesses' responsibility for their IT equipment

CKS are realists however and they have some concerns.

"Business buys peace of mind, and confidentiality trumps environmental concerns nine times out of ten," states Mr Morgan. "At the moment it is a wild west out there, with little standardisation among operators of deletion options and insurance coverage. The first casualty of any price war on end-of-life treatment is usually the standards and costs of proper process."

"Too few customers are translating their data concerns into non-negotiable practice. As in the case of treatment for hazards and toxins, best practice should be the demand, not least cost minimal compliance."

The substances which cause most concern environmentally are heavy metals and oxides of elements such as lead, mercury, cadmium and chromium and compounds such as halogenated substances e.g. CFCs, polychlorinated biphenyls (aka PCBs, not to be confused with printed circuit boards), PVC and brominated flame retardants - which can give rise to toxic dioxins when incinerated.

Manufacturers and specialists such as CKS can only take reactive measures to these substances and Mr Morgan adds that ethical manufacturers such as Dell are working towards eradicating the inclusion of dangerous substances in their products.

"Thanks to the RoHS directive, by the middle of this year it will be illegal to include certain hazards within new products. However, it is good to see certain manufacturers going above and beyond the call of duty. For example, Dell has recently made a corporate commitment to

be completely green by 2009," says the director. "This commitment has already been translated into reality with the production of a carbon neutral motherboard. It would be good to see business play its part by halting the purchase of older, less energy efficient and more hazardous products when there are cleaner alternatives available, e.g. LCDs in place of CRTs."

An issue that both CKS executives wish to emphasise is the lack of guidance on businesses' responsibility for their IT equipment and how WEEE should only be viewed only as a starting point and not an answer to all the challenges being thrown up.

"The UK government has a lot to answer for in the transposition delays associated with WEEE," states Mr Morgan. "When the WEEE directive was signed in 2002, it was simply intended as a starting point, one that addressed the most urgent issues [around waste treatment] first, that would then be reviewed and expanded to bring greater structure to waste avoidance."

"That review is already underway and by 2008 we will have an expanded and updated directive to deal with. The UK government has allowed the development, discard, development, and disposal of one over-engineered implementation proposal after another. That is waste creation at bureaucratic scale."

According to Mr Sutcliffe: "Frustratingly all the debate around the WEEE directive has hidden the fact that business responsibilities aren't even a WEEE issue."

"Indeed, the business user's Duty of Care responsibilities have been in place since 1991 under Environment Protection Regulations. These responsibilities don't pass on to

producers and manufacturers, business users shouldn't be waiting for this to happen."

"It is only recently that the DTI has started reminding business about these responsibilities," adds Mr Morgan. "It's taken nearly five years to remember that we already have a legal framework that addresses the 'missing link' in WEEE. All the DTI now need to do is ensure that their practice guidelines are published and the linkages to Duty of Care made even more obvious."

Mr Morgan believes these delays will continue to hurt UK industry in other ways.

"In the UK we've been engaged in multiple rounds of consultations with the wrong people," he adds. "While other countries have implemented and have moved on to take a leadership role in areas that will next be the focus of attention. In October 2005 the EU stated their intent to invest in pan-European information systems to support compliance reporting and consistency of approach to producer collections."

"They also stated clearly their disappointment at the local interpretation and spin put on the WEEE directive which was hampering the smooth flow of goods and services across the region. Despite this we persist in our attempts to invent a better WEEE for the UK and suffer from none at all."

"So it should come as no surprise when the UK's IT industry aren't strongly positioned when it comes time to tender for these pan-European projects. Just because the UK government has let down its IT industry and the environment doesn't mean that other countries have done the same."