

Report on Green IT

The Globe and Mail, Thursday, March 12, 2009

Report on Green IT

EQUIPMENT

How green is my keyboard

Finding the most environmentally sensible equipment takes some doing. Here's where to look for help

BY GRANT BUCKLER

Businesses of all sorts are talking about what they do for the environment, and certainly the IT industry has jumped aboard the bandwagon. But how do customers — whether businesses or consumers — separate truth from “greenwashing” and decide which IT vendors really have their acts together?

Environmental labelling programs make the task easier, but it still takes work to find the most eco-responsible choice.

The easy part is assessing individual products, such as personal computers, which have measurable energy consumption and power-saving features.

Although Environment Canada has a long-standing environmental rating program for consumer products from cleaning products to furniture, known as EcoLogo, it does not yet cover computers. However, some printers and keyboards have EcoLogo certification. Details are available at www.eco-ogo.org.

In the absence of a home-

grown program to evaluate computers and related equipment, Canadian consumers need to look to U.S. initiatives.

The U.S. government's Energy Star program covers computers, printers, monitors and other equipment. Qualification depends on energy efficiency and such power-saving features as the ability to put the computer into a low-power “sleep” mode when not in use. A search of the Energy Star website (www.energystar.gov) finds about 1,200 computers and 1,500 printers.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also offers an online registry that is the nearest thing to a definitive guide to eco-friendly PCs: the Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool (EPEAT).

The EPA does not do testing of products: Manufacturers list their products in the registry, and the agency performs spot checks aimed at keeping them honest.

To qualify for EPEAT “bronze” status, computers and monitors must meet minimum environmental standards: Energy Star compliance, a product take-back program,

and a minimum of 65-per-cent reusable or recyclable content. Additional green features qualify a product in the “silver” and “gold” categories.

Major vendors such as Dell, Hewlett-Packard, Apple and Toshiba have multiple products on the list. (EPEAT covers only computers and monitors; no mobile phones or personal digital assistants are included.)

The list is available online at www.epeat.net. When it launched in June of 2006, the list included 30 products; it now has more than 1,000 entries, according to EPEAT spokesperson Sarah O'Brien.

EPEAT's listings take into account not only energy efficiency but also other environmental factors, such as whether a machine is designed for easy recycling. However, EPEAT does not assess the manufacturer's overall environmental record, and does not cover larger computing devices such as servers.

Companies that are considering machines not found on the EPEAT list should start by asking manufacturers and vendors the same questions that EPEAT asks. That criteria can



Just as important as how much energy the stuff uses during its life is what's going to happen to it when it's done.

Aaron Hay
Info-Tech Research Group

be found online at www.epeat.net/Criteria.aspx.

Businesses can also ask for such information through their request for proposal (RFP) when buying IT equipment.

Georgette Parsons, chief information officer at Mountain Equipment Co-op in Vancouver, says she has begun including questions about vendors' environmental initiatives in RFPs.

One of the first questions should be about the manufacturer's policy on taking back old equipment for refurbishing

or recycling, says Aaron Hay, a research consultant specializing in green IT at Info-Tech Research Group in London, Ont.

“Just as important as how much energy the stuff uses during its life is what's going to happen to it when it's done,” he says. “Most of the pollution occurs when that thing goes back into landfill.”

Most major computer vendors will take back equipment that isn't entirely obsolete. With older equipment, Mr. Hay says the best option is a recycling program that extracts reusable materials such as copper and glass.

Toshiba and Dell accept some equipment for recycling free of charge, even if it was made by another company. Lenovo charges a fee for recycling, but can give customers their money back on old equipment if someone else can use it.

While most vendors offer such programs, Mr. Hay says it's important to ask exactly what they do with returned equipment. Some “recycling” operations ship old equipment to developing countries where much of it ends up in landfills,

or low-paid workers are exposed to health hazards as they dismantle it. Mr. Hay advises looking for take-back programs that are audited and verified by third parties.

Another way to keep older PCs out of the garbage is to upgrade them rather than replace them, and that's easier if they have modular designs and use standardized components, says Stephen Pollack, founder and former chief executive of Toronto-based PlateSpin Ltd., a data-centre management company now owned by Novell Inc.

Brand-name manufacturers such as Dell and Hewlett-Packard offer industry-standard components, while no-name “white box” manufacturers may use alternate parts, depending on price.

Another good source of information about companies' environmental commitments are corporate social responsibility reports, available at www.corporateregister.com and www.reportalert.info, adds Jessica Vreeswijk, green IT consultant at Terrabytes Consulting in Victoria.

Special to The Globe and Mail