

There's more to green IT than good public relations

Saving money is reason enough for companies big and small

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Think computers don't have much impact on the environment? Consider this statistic from International Data Corp. (Canada) Ltd.: All the desktop and notebook personal computers in Canada burn enough energy in a year to drive a fleet of 7,500 sport utility vehicles once around the planet. And that's just if those computers spent the whole year in power-saving sleep mode.

Green IT is popular these days. That's partly because of growing concern about the environment, but also partly because businesses are realizing it's possible to save money and save the planet at the same time.

The top reason Canadian businesses invest in green IT is cost savings, says David Senf, director of infrastructure solutions at IDC Canada. Protecting the environment comes in second.

One example of dual benefits is virtualization, in which one computer server is made to do the work of two or more. Mr. Senf says two in five mid-sized businesses now use virtualization to reduce their power bills.

NetKeepers, a Markham, Ont., company with 15 employees, hosts computer systems for small and medium businesses. Shaul Swartz, its chief executive, says NetKeepers started exploring virtualization three years ago to avoid leasing more data-centre space, but then realized it could also help the environment. Having crammed 240 virtual servers into seven large boxes, Mr. Swartz calculates NetKeepers has reduced its carbon output by 783 tons a year.

Another way to go green is purchasing energy-efficient equipment. Buyers will find useful information at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's EPEAT registry, which lists computers and related equipment that meet environmental guidelines (www.epeat.net), and Environment Canada's EcoLogo (www.ecologo.org), which doesn't cover computers but includes related equipment like keyboards and printers.

An often-overlooked option is reducing the total amount of equipment used, says Jessica Vreeswijk, a green IT consultant at Terrabytes Consulting in Victoria. For instance, a multifunction machine that prints, scans, copies and faxes uses less power than four separate machines, and a networked printer can serve several desks.

Even energy-efficient computers use power, so many energy-conscious businesses are trying harder to turn them off when they are not in use. Mr. Swartz says NetKeepers employees are urged to shut down their office PCs or put them in sleep mode when they aren't being used.

Smaller businesses aren't as conscious of the need to shut down unused equipment, Mr. Senf says. Just 29 per cent of companies with fewer than 1,000 employees actively encourage workers to shut off computers and related equipment when not in use. Among businesses with more than 1,000 employees, the figure is 49 per cent.

Businesses don't usually save money by disposing of old equipment responsibly, but the process need not be costly, either.

Dell, Hewlett-Packard and Toshiba accept certain types of equipment for recycling, free of charge, even if it was made by another company. Other vendors do so for a fee. Mr. Senf says businesses can also try to use hardware longer before replacing it — another measure that saves money while helping the environment.

Mr. Senf says IDC's research shows that smaller businesses pay less attention to the environmental impact of IT than larger ones.

He believes that's partly because larger corporations are more conscious of the public-relations benefits of environmental responsibility.