

Science for Environment Policy

Recycling and reuse of WEEE by businesses may be more widespread than reported

A recent survey of businesses in France, Germany and the UK has revealed that they recycle and refurbish much of their waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE). However, some of this information is not being reported under the EU's WEEE Directive because the waste is being disposed of informally or by contractors, rather than by manufacturers who are responsible for the whole life cycle of the products.

The WEEE Directive¹ was developed to ensure that EU Member States prevent or minimise the amount of WEEE and to reduce electrical equipment's environmental impact when it reaches its end-of-life stage. Businesses are a major source of WEEE.

To understand how European businesses dispose of used electrical and electronic equipment (EEE), the researchers surveyed IT managers from a total of 455 businesses, comprising around 50 small businesses (1-50 employees), 50 medium-sized businesses (51-200 employees) and 50 large businesses (201 or more employees) in each of the three countries. The study focused on IT equipment.

Significantly, most of the companies surveyed reported that they do send end-of-life EEE for [recycling](#) or reuse. Small businesses were the most likely to use an informal route of disposal and large businesses the least likely. Large businesses were more likely to use an outside waste contractor for disposal, and small businesses the least likely. The least common route for all businesses in all three countries is through the equipment supplier.

This creates a problem for the manufacturers who are also suppliers, as they are responsible for managing the whole life cycle of the product under the WEEE Directive's extended producer responsibility. In addition, under the WEEE Directive, manufacturers must report on the recovery of the products that they have sold. If waste contractors, for example, do not report under the WEEE Directive, this suggests that recycling and reuse rates are probably under-reported and that policymakers are not receiving the full picture of recycling and reuse of WEEE in EU Member States.

Other findings from the survey suggest that businesses keep IT equipment for an average of 3 to 4 years. Unlike small and medium-sized businesses, large businesses tended to have fixed replacement times for this equipment, keeping it for 3 years on average. More medium and large businesses in France had fixed replacement times compared with similar sized companies in the UK and Germany.

In addition, the staff members most commonly responsible for deciding that equipment was ready for disposal were IT managers and IT technicians. Once the equipment left the business, most companies in all three countries had little information about the fate of the WEEE. Most small businesses did not donate their WEEE to a charity as a route of disposal, although medium and large businesses sometimes used this route for their end-of-life equipment.

Furthermore, just under half of the survey respondents in large companies in the UK and France did not know whether the IT end-of-life policy was included in the company's EMS (Environmental Management System), whereas most large German companies did feature this policy in their EMS.



27 June 2013

Issue 334

**Subscribe to free
weekly News Alert**

Source: Peagam, R., McIntyre, K., Basson, L. and France, C. (2013) Business-to-Business Information Technology User Practices at End of Life in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*. 17(2): 224 – 237. DOI: 10.1111/jiec.12017.

Contact:
r.peagam@surrey.ac.uk

Read more about:
[Sustainable business,](#)
[Waste](#)

The contents and views included in Science for Environment Policy are based on independent, peer-reviewed research and do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Commission.

To cite this article/service: "[Science for Environment Policy](#)": European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service, edited by SCU, The University of the West of England, Bristol.

1. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/weee/index_en.htm