

Sustainable IT tips: Buying hardware

Purchasing the right hardware for your needs

- Cheapest is not necessarily best***
Generally you get what you pay for. Devices that use a lot of consumable goods, such as printers, are often offered at cheap prices because the proprietary brand-name ones cost more. What you need to consider is the “total cost of ownership” – how much, over the likely life of the equipment, you are going to spend on purchasing, servicing, consumables and power consumption. Often paying more initially can reduce the costs later.
- The warranty period is the best guide to the expected service life***
The longer the warranty period, the greater the likelihood that the machine will have a long service life. In a choice between hardware with a similar specification, a longer warranty can represent a more reliably engineered system that is less likely to go wrong.
- Does the manufacturer provide environmental reporting information?***
The issue with environmental reporting – such as measurements of power consumption, embodied energy, waste production and carbon emissions – isn't simply that it gives you extra information to decide between different brands or devices. Companies, which issue environmental reports, are more likely to police the activities of their suppliers to ensure that they conform to the product standard – and that ensures that tight environmental standards are applied in everyday industry practice.
- Check for non-branded equivalents for the equipment***
Branded goods have the greatest exposure in the media, but often more generic/non-branded equivalents are cheaper. The spares for non-branded goods may also be cheaper and more easily available as they are more likely to be used in a range of consumer goods. Warranty periods/terms are also important in making a choice between branded/non-branded goods.
- Is the user able to service and repair the device?***
Enquire if the device is a sealed unit, or whether the user can easily replace components that might fail over the device's operating life.
- Check if the device uses proprietary or standard/generic cables/connectors***
If a device uses a generic power supply and the connectors (e.g. sound/audio or ethernet) use standard fittings, these will be easier and cheaper to replace. For power supplies especially, being able to use a generic power supply means that you can reuse the unit with other equipment when the machine reaches the end of its working life.
- Check that repair is an option, rather than wholesale replacement***
Check that spares for the most likely parts of the equipment to fail – rechargeable batteries, hard drives, cables and connectors, and more – are available at a reasonable cost, even if it requires a service technician to undertake repairs.
- Does the equipment contain hazardous substances?***
In compliance with recent legislation in Europe and elsewhere, goods should indicate whether they contain hazardous compounds such as mercury, cadmium or lead. Some manufacturers are also producing goods that are free of PVC and flame-retardants.
- Is there are take-back/trade-in option?***
If you rent/lease goods you should expect them to be taken back at the end of the lease. For goods that are bought, check if the manufacturer runs a take-back scheme for the machine, or the machine's consumables such as ink/toner cartridges.
- Does the warranty offer on-site service?***
If the device fails you may have to send it back to the manufacturer's service department for repair – which is likely to cost time and money. Check if the manufacturer can offer a contract with a service company to carry on-site repairs as this may take less time to organise.

*This checklist was extracted from a new publication by the APC, **A sustainable guide to IT**, written by environmental activist and ICT expert Paul Mobbs. To read the other Sustainable IT tip sheets, or to download the publication, visit greeningit.apc.org. For more information email info@apc.org.*