SUSTAINABLE IT: HOW THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION IS GOING GREEN

This is not an eBook about increasing office recycling, reducing waste, or cutting down on printing for the benefit of the environment. These are all things that businesses and office spaces around the world should be - and are - channelling more time into in the name of sustainability. But that's not all that businesses should be doing.

To be a sustainable organisation today, attention needs to turn to sustainable IT: what it means, how to make it a core focus in any business, and what small (and big) changes you can make to start leading the way and providing solutions to your clients when they come forward seeking systems and products to boost their business. \

First thing's first, what is sustainable IT, what does the term really mean, and is it being accurately interpreted by companies in 2022?

WHAT DO BUSINESSES BELIEVE SUSTAINABLE IT TO BE?

There are two branches of sustainable IT in its simplest sense as recognised by most companies and organisations – the first focuses on recycling and reusing, while the other focuses on methods of disposal.

The fact is that in the EU alone, around 160,000 old and unused laptops and computers are thrown away every day. More shocking still, around 70% of those devices could be recycled and given a new lease of life either as a single device or after being stripped down for parts.

Now that's all well and good. Businesses have more choice now than they have ever had before when it comes to sustainable partners, charities, and even profitable initiatives that will trade their unwanted devices for other assets or financial earnings. This makes it easy for businesses and companies across all sectors to start cashing their unwanted devices in for a greener footprint, benefitting the environment and seeing their old laptops go to a worthy home.

But sustainable IT starts much sooner than that – with the manufacturing of devices, their management, and the way that they are used.

And this is where the gaps start to appear, and cracks start to show – with a lack of understanding in and across every industry when it comes to really getting to grips with sustainable IT at its core.

SUSTAINABLE IT IN ITS REALEST SENSE

If something isn't producing physical waste, then it is easy to see it as harmless to the environment – or to at least pretend the issue isn't there. By sending an email or setting up a virtual event on Zoom, you are minimising the need for travel, printing, and conference snacks and so you are technically supporting a sustainability initiative of your own – right?

While this is an act of sustainability in one regard, by increasing the use of IT technology and digital products companies are at risk of heightening their carbon emissions through their IT and data usage – with the ever-changing apps and need for innovation causing a high turnover of electrical goods which contributes to the environmental destruction.

Did you know that data centres represented nearly 1% of the world's energy demand in 2019, and that with the pandemic and the rise of working from home and remotely, as well as digital events and meetings growing at an unprecedented rate, this is only continuing to increase?

A wholly sustainable approach to IT in an organisation encompasses:

- Recycling old hardware and devices
- Extending the lifecycle of devices and hardware that are used within the business
- Procuring devices and hardware with a minimal carbon lifecycle through reputable vendors
- Improving employee awareness of sustainable device usage and the damage that a single smartphone's manufacturing process does to the environment
- Using green cloud software to minimise data centre usage
- Powering data centres with renewable energy sources, instead of fossil fuels

As this list demonstrates, awareness and education are as important as actions in developing a plan for sustainable IT within any business – with this eBook created to support IT resellers in sharing solutions with their clients as to how they can improve their green footprint and understand the need for green IT not just in the future, but now.

WHY NOW IS THE TIME TO EMBRACE SUSTAINABLE IT

The world is becoming increasingly reliant on digital solutions and technology. Demand is rising, data centres are growing, and businesses are investing more in innovative digital technology such as AI which continues to draw on natural resources and challenge the sustainability of the digital revolution.

Crucially, without the right advice and solutions at their disposal, individual companies can only do so much when it comes to taking these demands and making them "green".

The change needs to come from the IT resellers and suppliers like us, who are in a position to match clients with the tools they need to become more sustainable. And the figures show that there is a market for it – with 61% of businesses surveyed by Capgemini stating that they want tech firms to help them measure the environmental impact of their IT set up.

WHAT BUSINESSES NEED TO KNOW FROM YOU

1. Their current environmental impact

When businesses are aware of the environmental impact of their IT systems and devices, they become more empowered to make the changes necessary. If you tell a company how many devices that they are funnelling into landfill every year, liken this to something they can picture, and share the reality of their e-waste with them, the chances are that they will respond.

Companies will not change until they understand where they lie in relation to the problem.

2. The locality of the problem

When a problem seems a million miles away, that is on a landfill site in a far-flung country, the issue becomes distanced. Through awareness, we can help companies to understand that e-waste leads to the release of toxic substances that aren't just unattractive to look at, but which cause real harm to human health and to the surrounding wildlife.

3. The impact of all their energy usage combines

Do your clients know that the manufacturing of a new smartphone or laptop has a high carbon footprint than that device will exhibit for the rest of its usable lifespan?

What this means, for a company, is that replacing outdated devices is one of the worst things they can do for the environment – creating high demand for new manufacturing while leaving outdated and older models out in landfill.

In addition to devices and physical hardware, the development of applications has a significant effect on energy usage with continuous testing and re-testing, while the use of onsite data centres and IT infrastructure systems creates a huge demand and pressure on the local energy around a company headquarters.

4. The benefits of sustainable IT.

From cost reductions within the business to an improved brand image as a result of an increase in their ESG score (Environmental, Social, and Governance), through to improved customer satisfaction and a better handle on the importance of working with the environment, companies simply need to understand the benefits of sustainable IT in order to prioritise it.

SOUND SIMPLE?

It is at this point that the need for a strategy becomes apparent, with IT resellers and tech firms being urged to support their clients in creating and finetuning sustainability strategies for the long haul.

CREATING A SUSTAINABLE IT STRATEGY

The foundation of a sustainable IT strategy starts with an understanding of where the company is starting from – that is, its current environmental footprint.

During this initial stage, companies need to be supported in using carbon emission assessment tools, which will uncover and help them to identify the carbon footprint for their data centres, the footprint of their application portfolio, and the emissions savings that could be made by moving to the cloud and building a model for sustainable IT moving forward.

From there, it's important to align the businesses sustainability plan with their overall business plan and their commitment to the environment and to going green. Customers and clients across all industries want to be able to understand the values of any business that they buy from or partner with, and that means acknowledging their commitment to sustainability across the board.

Here are some of the ways that companies and businesses can build and nurture a successful sustainability plan for their IT systems.

DEFINE KPIS

It wouldn't be a business move without some KPIs that can be measured and tracked – so identifying these early and checking in on them on a regular basis is fundamental to the success of any strategy.

CREATE A TEAM COMMITTED TO THE GOVERNANCE OF THE STRATEGY

Getting the buy in of senior stakeholders is a fundamental part of any successful business strategy, and when it comes to nurturing a sustainable IT plan that means ensuring that all teams – from the top down – are a part of the changes. Awareness is such an important factor in sustainable IT in the workplace, with small changes and actions things that all employees can and should be making to support the overall initiative.

One way to manage this can be to create a dedicated sustainability team whose responsibility it is to boost and nurture the buy-in of different teams and groups across the business; inspiring and leading by example when it comes to using devices in an energy efficient way and more.

BRING SUSTAINABILITY INTO SOFTWARE ARCHITECTURE

This means monitoring the environmental cost and impact of software development and deployment and using green coding where possible to minimise the carbon emissions output.

WORK WITH SUSTAINABLE IT VENDORS

New suppliers should be aligned with your goals and your strategy, and that includes buying suppliers and hardware from vendors who are committed to reducing their own carbon footprint.

A good thing to look out for in this respect is IT vendors who supply devices which have been made under sustainable manufacturing guidelines – that is, reducing the amount of materials and chemicals that go into producing and packaging each device, be it a laptop or a smartphone.

MOVE TO ENTERPRISE CLOUD APPLICATIONS

A significant pick up in the number of businesses using enterprise cloud applications could see a carbon emissions saving of one billion tons of CO_2 in three years, with the adoption of green cloud architecture helping businesses to cut costs as well as decrease their environmental impact and carbon footprint.

USE ASSETS MORE EFFECTIVELY

This is a big one, which brings us full circle back to the idea of devices and hardware being a fundamental part of the problem around IT and its environmental impact. The fact is that businesses are seeking and creating new technology every day in line with the digital revolution, and what this means is that devices, hardware assets, and physical items are becoming outdated at an alarming rate.

Currently, poor disposal of these unwanted items means that thousands of tons are ending up in landfill every year, contributing to the immense rise in dangerous and hazardous e-waste.

By changing the way that modern businesses use assets, we can not only minimise the amount of e-waste that goes to landfill but can also remanufacture laptops and other devices so that they continue to be used by a company, or so that they can be passed on to someone who needs or who will purchase them.

There are a multitude of charities out there who take donated and unwanted laptops and devices and repurpose them for third world countries and those areas across the UK and beyond where children in schools need access to computers. Alternatively, there are endless initiatives and opportunities for businesses to trade in or sell unwanted devices to other organisations – all options which reduce their carbon footprint and can increase their ESG focus score as well as boost the charitable arm of the business.

WHY NOW IS THE TIME TO START

Awareness is perhaps the biggest challenge facing companies who wish to boost their commitment to sustainable IT, largely because it is such a misrepresented topic which focuses solely on thrown away devices and which gives little thought to the manufacturing process and the other aspects of business IT systems which impact the environment.

In this eBook, we have highlighted just some of the ways in which IT sustainability can and should be at the core of business priorities this year and in the coming years – with ideas that you can share with all of your clients around how to take control of their carbon emissions and make changes for the better.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A well-rounded sustainable strategy needs to consider the full lifecycle of a product – how it is manufactured, how it is used and managed, and how it is recycled or disposed of.
- Using products for longer is a simple, easy, and very effective way to reduce carbon emissions.
- Move away from data centres that are powered by fossil fuels and embrace those that are considered "green data centres" – while being aware of the power of green washing and its ability to mislead.
- Define KPIs