Don't bin it, spin it: how reuse is powering greener IT

Britain's IT sector is learning that end-of-life doesn't have to mean end-of-value. By embracing circular economy practices, organisations are cutting costs, reducing carbon, and giving technology a meaningful second life…

In server rooms and data centres across the UK, a quiet revolution is underway. Organisations are rethinking what happens to routers, switches, and laptops once they've reached the end of their 'first life.'

Instead of consigning them to landfill, companies are adopting circular economy practices — refurbishing, redeploying, and recycling IT network equipment in ways that conserve resources, save money, and strengthen reputations.

"It's increasingly feasible to scale circular practices," says Emily Roberts, Head of Business Development at Absolute ITAD. "From compliance wins to cost savings, resilience, and reputational enhancement, the benefits are profound. The challenge is making sure organisations have the right skills, processes, and tracking systems — but those barriers are surmountable through targeted investments and partnerships."

Why businesses are getting on board

Motivations for embracing the circular economy in IT are as varied as they are compelling.

Environmental sustainability tops the list. Extending the lifespan of equipment dramatically reduces lifecycle carbon emissions — crucial when as much as 80% of emissions occur before a device is even switched on. Recovering rare metals like copper, gold, and palladium from old kit also reduces pressure on global supply chains.

Cost is another driver: "refurbishment or redeployment costs much less than buying new," explains Roberts. "Organisations can also generate revenue by reselling equipment and cut disposal costs."

Marc Newman, CEO and Founder of Give IT Forward and Rec Assets Limited, adds that "while cost savings and efficiency are often the primary motivations for companies when managing their IT assets, I'm pleased to see a growing number of organisations considering how their obsolete equipment can be reused, recycled, or donated to charity. There

is certainly more that could be done through regulatory incentives, but in my experience, it's consumer expectations that are increasingly driving businesses toward socially responsible practices."

For many, compliance is non-negotiable. The UK's Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Regulations require businesses to recover and recycle IT gear responsibly, while data wiping ensures compliance with GDPR.

Then there's the reputational edge. Companies are under pressure from investors, customers, and employees to demonstrate real progress against ESG targets. "Sustainability credentials are increasingly a badge of trust," says Carl Greenwood, Business Development

Manager at Recycle IT.

Finally, resilience matters. Reuse and refurbishment help organisations sidestep global supply shortages and price volatility — a lesson painfully underscored during the pandemic.

From regulation to real-world impact

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Indeed, according to Greenwood, such regulations support and influence the implementation of circular economy principles through several key mechanisms:

1. **Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) regulations:** These regulations mandate proper collection, recycling, and disposal of electronic waste, encouraging reuse and recycling of IT equipment to reduce landfill waste and environmental harm.

2. **Producer responsibility schemes:** UK policies promote extended producer responsibility, urging manufacturers to take accountability for the lifecycle impacts of their products, including design for durability, reuse, and end-of-life recycling.

3. **Environmental protection regulations:** Stricter standards for hazardous substances and waste management incentivise the design of more sustainable, less toxic IT equipment, aligning with circular economy goals.

4. **Environmental reporting and certification:** Regulations requiring organisations to report on their sustainability practices encourage companies to adopt circular strategies like refurbishment and responsible recycling.

5. **Incentives and funding:** Government grants and incentives support initiatives that facilitate circular economy practices, including refurbishing and resource-efficient management of IT equipment.

6. **Policy frameworks and commitments:** The UK's broader sustainability and carbon reduction commitments motivate organisations to integrate circular economy principles into their IT lifecycle management to meet environmental targets.

"UK regulators increasingly recognise the importance of implementing circular economy principles and promote the 'reduce, reuse, recycle' approach through various regulatory frameworks," notes Newman. "ISO certification is a strong example, offering a structured standard for environmental responsibility. Another key enabler is the T11 exemption, which permits businesses like mine to refurbish Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE). Additionally, the Environment Agency's classification system helps support companies committed to managing the IT equipment lifecycle responsibly. UK also enables businesses to apply for an Approved Authorised Treatment Facility (AATF) licence — an important step that provides both practical support and motivation to grow a business in this vital sector of the economy."

Roberts adds that local initiatives such as Advance London also provide grants and platforms to support reuse and repair, making the leap to circular operations less daunting.

Obstacles on the road to circularity

Despite the momentum, challenges remain. One is a lack of technical skills in repair and refurbishment. Another is resistance at senior leadership levels, where decision-makers sometimes default to destruction rather than reuse out of misplaced data security concerns.

Newman recalls one case where a board overruled its IT team and insisted on destroying devices — despite the fact the hardware held no data: "it shows how critical it is to educate leadership about what secure reuse actually looks like."

Other hurdles include tracking complex supply chains, navigating manufacturer lock-ins, and managing upfront costs. Solutions range from barcode or RFID tracking to partnerships with accredited treatment facilities, as well as demonstrating clear ROI through pilot programs.

Roberts adds that cultural change is just as important as technical fixes: "for many organisations, the barrier isn't the technology — it's mindset. Building repair skills, introducing lifecycle tracking, and adopting repair-friendly contracts all help create a culture that sees equipment as an asset to be maximised, not a liability to be discarded."

The social side of circular IT in the UK

Circularity in IT isn't just about the environment or the bottom line. Increasingly, it's about social value. Newman founded Give IT Forward to help organisations donate retired IT equipment securely and responsibly.

"During the pandemic, schools and community centres were crying out for laptops and tablets," reports Newman. "Today, demand comes from a much wider range of charities supporting underprivileged communities. Knowing that a piece of kit you no longer need can change someone's life — that's powerful motivation."

This social impact dimension is often overlooked, but it resonates strongly with employees and customers. Donating IT equipment not only prevents perfectly usable devices from ending up in landfill, it bridges the digital divide — helping communities access education, employment, and essential services.

Best practices: what works in the UK

Case studies show that circular IT isn't just theory — it works in practice.

Give IT Forward recently helped a large organisation donate Microsoft Surface tablets that were less than five years old. By removing devices from remote management systems and refurbishing them, the company enabled the tablets to be donated to charities supporting young people from under-resourced communities.

Other standout examples, says Roberts, include:

- Circular computing and Atos/DEFRA, which supplied 34,000 UK government users with remanufactured laptops, cutting carbon footprints dramatically.

- E Cycle Limited, a non-profit refurbisher that has donated 30,000 PCs to Africa.

- The Royal Mint, which processes 4,000 tonnes of circuit boards annually to extract precious metals and recycle plastics.

- Westcon Comstor, which re-enters tested and repackaged network gear back into circulation.

- DTC Telecom, which hand-disassembles telecoms equipment, securely erases data, and recovers precious metals—all within the UK.

"These cases show the circular economy isn't just an ideal," says Roberts. "It's already happening — and at scale."

Measuring what matters

Tracking impact is vital for building trust and demonstrating value. Businesses are now reporting metrics such as tonnes of CO_2 saved, reuse rates, and reductions in virgin material usage. Some, like Circular Computing, highlight that remanufactured laptops emit just 6.34% of the CO_2 of a new device.

Frameworks such as BS 8001 and Life Cycle Assessment tools help organisations standardise their reporting, while integration into ESG and Scope 3 disclosures ensures sustainability isn't siloed but embedded across corporate reporting.

"Partnering with organisations like ours gives companies full transparency on how their donations directly support communities," says Newman. "It's about amplifying both environmental and social impact."

The future of circular IT

Looking ahead, industry experts agree that the circular economy in IT is poised for rapid growth. Supply chain pressures are unlikely to ease soon, rare metals remain finite, and the regulatory net is tightening. At the same time, younger generations entering the workforce expect businesses to take sustainability seriously — not just in words but in action.

For IT managers, that means embedding circularity from the ground up: designing networks with longevity in mind, documenting compliance rigorously, and choosing partners that can demonstrate responsible reuse and recycling practices.

Cultural resistance will remain a challenge, but education and evidence can win hearts and minds.

"Show the board how circular practices save money, reduce risk, and enhance reputation," says Roberts. "Once leadership sees the data, they usually stop asking why and start asking how."

The shift toward a circular IT economy in the UK is no longer a fringe idea — it's becoming business as usual. Regulatory frameworks are aligning with market demand, and forward-looking organisations are seizing the chance to save money, build resilience, and strengthen their ESG story.

For IT managers, the message is clear: design for longevity, track your assets, partner with accredited refurbishers, and never underestimate the power of transparency.

Or, as Roberts puts it: "the circular economy is no longer just an option for IT — it's the smartest strategy for the future." ■

Emily Roberts, Absolute ITAD
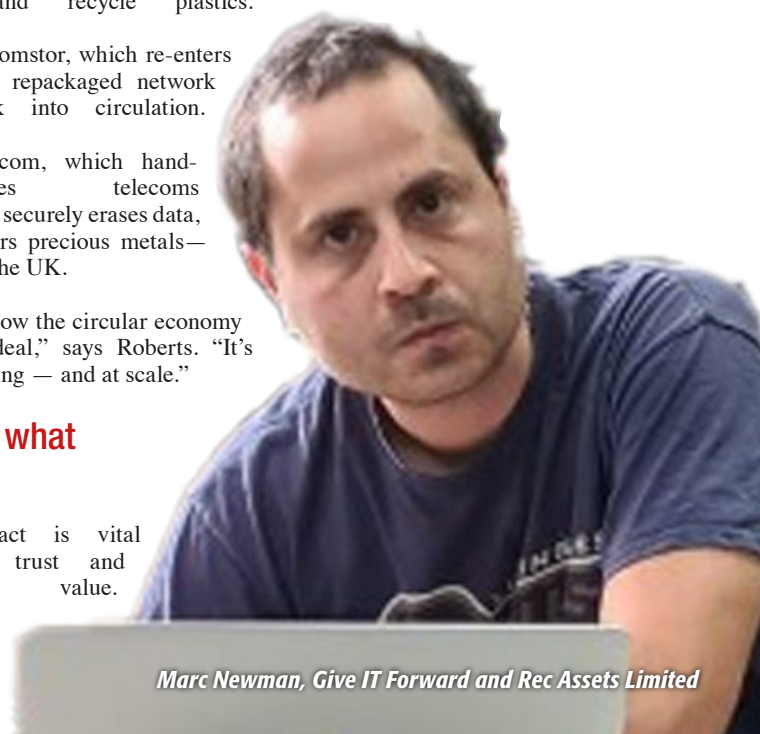
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