What to do with one’s old IT is, understandably, not the priority for an organisation’s systems team. Much thought is given to the IT assets when they are chosen and in use, but interest is lost once a system is decommissioned. Andrew Boddington, returnonit, addresses the questions that companies often fail to address when it comes to disposing of unwanted IT equipment.

Often the spur to doing something about end-of-life equipment is when the storeroom is full and no more can be fitted in! However, keeping unwanted kit is not just a waste of floor space, but can lead to data security problems and diminish any residual value.

In 2012 the Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust learnt the hard way about dealing with old kit in a timely and professional manner when they had the largest ever fine imposed (£325,000) by the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO). Personal data belonging to patients and staff was taken from Brighton General Hospital in September 2010 when disks that should have been destroyed were removed from a storeroom and subsequently sold online. This highlights the need for both public and private organisations to responsibly manage the protection of data when retiring IT equipment: timely disposal of unwanted equipment minimises the risk of theft and can maximise the returned value from items.

Responsibility for following waste IT disposal directives and data protection laws extends up to the most senior levels within an organisation. Therefore it is important to choose a disposal partner who knows used IT, can safeguard your reputation and return to you any value from the systems.

What to look for in an IT disposal partner? What will meet your organisation’s needs for disposal and recycling of computers and ensure security of your company data?
Many smaller organisations treat IT waste (PCs, servers, storage, printers and so on) no differently to general waste and get a 'man in a white van' to take it away. This is fraught with danger as:

- there may be no proof of what was collected;
- they are unlikely to wipe data or ensure destruction of disks;
- they may not have a waste carrier’s licence;
- at worst they could be fly-tipping.

This cheap approach can cost dearly as illegal treatment of IT waste or an individual’s data getting in to the wrong hands could lead to fines for your organisation.

Professional general waste disposal organisations might ensure that your old IT is processed responsibly, but they do not necessarily have any IT-specific skills. They are likely to charge for removal and treat the equipment the same as any other waste (by recycling and/or sending to landfill), without offering data-wiping of storage or returning money to you from the refurbishing and reuse of IT.

If you already have an asset management contract you may find that IT disposal is part of the service alongside leasing, sales and maintenance of IT solutions. This will suit many large organisations that require a one-stop shop, but you may find the diverse sets of IT services are not appropriate for the specifics of managing and removing your old computers, and they may be comparatively expensive.

Most medium to large organisations ideally require a partner that specialises in removing and processing used computers, understands their data security requirements, and can return money for equipment with residual value. The best IT disposal partner will offer:

- WEEE-compliant disposal;
- licence to carry waste;
- certificate of transfer for collections;
- audit of outcomes for processed equipment;
- data security from basic data wiping or disk destruction, through to certified military specification multi-pass data wiping, and even disk shredding on site;
- return of money from equipment with residual value;
- a level of professionalism and social responsibility that matches your own when dealing with the IT waste.

Reuse versus recycling

If you are responsible for unwanted IT equipment, ideally you will be looking for an ethical and environmentally sensitive way to remove and process the kit. You may have seen articles highlighting the problems from IT waste transported to developing countries for ad-hoc recycling, which has released toxins and littered the land. As an affluent society we should not take a cheapest ‘out of sight, out of mind’ approach to disposal, but instead be prepared to pay for a professional outcome. By choosing a UK-based waste IT processor you know they will be monitored and controlled by tighter legislation than those in many countries, and this will avoid your organisation being linked with polluting practices.

Recycling IT is rightly viewed as better than dumping in landfill, but is this the best we can do? With many organisations always deploying the latest technology and refreshing their IT after three or four years, there can be substantial ‘life’ left in the old equipment. It is a waste to send this redundant kit straight to recycling, but most organisations do not have the skills or time to consider the managed reuse provided by a specialist disposal partner.

Prior to reuse you will want to know that your partner has destroyed your data in a manner that fits the sensitivity of that data, and you should expect a report showing the level to which data wiping and/or destruction has been performed.

As well as electronic cleaning, you will want to know that the physical item has been cleaned of asset tags and labels identifying your organisation.

Ideally your waste disposal partner of choice will return you money based on the value obtained for the kit, which will at least go some way to offsetting the professional service costs of collection, processing, data wiping and so on.

With a sufficient proportion of more valuable equipment, you could find your organisation having money returned after the pick-up and processing of old kit. You are then in the lucky position of choosing whether to add this returned money to the IT budget or see it as a bonus that can be put towards CSR (corporate social responsibility) or charitable aims. The IT department is often viewed as nothing but an expensive cost centre, but doing the right thing environmentally with old IT and putting the money returned towards a good cause can positively raise the profile of both the IT department and the organisation.

With a little forethought and the right partner you can ensure the best for the environment and your finances when a computer is no longer required. By reusing IT the embodied carbon emissions associated with the original manufacture are amortised over a longer period. Reuse of IT is better than recycling and can deliver financial returns.