

Whatever happened to Green IT?

A roundtable discussion hosted by The CIO Partnership in collaboration with Olswang LLP Law firm
Tuesday October 2nd 2012

Introduction

Green IT +TECHNOLOGY, is the tenth in Olswang's series of +TECHNOLOGY events. +TECHNOLOGY addresses the need to understand and harness the impact of technology across a broad range of industries.

This roundtable discussion involving 16 business leaders was chaired by Lord St John of Bletso, who sits as a cross-bencher in the House of Lords and has an interest in Information Technology and Environmental Protection. He is a member of the House of Lords Communications Select Committee and the Information Committee.

Gary Hird, IT Strategist at the John Lewis Partnership and author of 'Green IT in Practice', supported by Trewin Restorick, CEO, Global Action Plan, set the scene for our discussion by explaining the Green IT approach chosen by their organisations. The highlights are summarised below.

Does IT lead or follow the green agenda?

The question was raised about what has IT done and what is IT doing to lead the green agenda? A discussion ensued.

Many businesses have undertaken data centre consolidation with the introduction of server virtualisation, managed print services and the procurement of greener IT equipment. Data centres are still major consumers of energy, yet the IT department is often excluded from involvement in many businesses' energy and environmental policy making. Some 60% of data centre energy is used for powering or cooling the equipment in the datacentre. Is this really necessary?

IT has enabled employees to travel less, through home working and the use of Webinars and on-line meetings. IT has helped some companies reduce waste through improved forecasting and optimisation of supply chain transport and deliveries. A few organizations have introduced energy monitoring of different floors or departments in their buildings and encourage staff to be more economical with energy consumption. Across Europe the vehicle tracking systems and other transport management changes could save €13.2 billion in energy bills.

In times gone by, businesses led the way with investment in technology and employees followed. We are currently undergoing a sea-change whereby technology is consumer-led, with many employees owning more advanced technology in the form of smart phones and other mobile devices. Employees are also communicating differently with extensive use of social media and instant messaging. We are spawning a new generation of workforce for whom it is perfectly natural to make "friends" with people they have never met and communicate quite comfortable using a variety of new and changing social media.

Even older generation managers are using technology such as Webinars and on-line meetings to avoid the need for travel.

The point was made that many IT projects with positive "green" credentials were not IT-driven projects, but the by-product of other pressures such as modernising IT infrastructure to reduce maintenance costs, or encouraging staff to work from home and not travel to work during the Olympics.

One company found that encouraging staff to work from home during the Olympics was so beneficial to their effectiveness it now has a formal policy to encourage more home-working.

The point was raised that it has been the consumer that has led the way with the take-up of things like fair-trade products and buying local produce. It is likely that green IT will be more consumer led than government or industry led. There is clearly a need for better education of senior management and employees on the broader issues of IT and environmental impact.

Throw-away culture

Questions were raised about the lifespan of modern technology and what should be done with out-of-date computers. Not just data-centre equipment but corporate PCs. At the consumer end many people have drawers at home with old unused mobile phones. This has been a result of excellent marketing by the mobile phone manufacturers to buy the latest smarter device (smarter in both looks and functionality), but also due to mobile phone contracts lasting only 18 months to 2 years, thereby encouraging consumers to upgrade to newer technologies. The trend seems to be for devices to have shorter and shorter lives, thereby exacerbating the problem.

What about cloud computing?

There was a lengthy discussion about the benefits or otherwise of cloud computing and its role in corporate IT. Interestingly, providers of cloud IT services do not promote the potential green benefits of using their services, although that would actually depend on how efficient their datacentres are and how they source their energy.

The European Commission has developed a Code of Conduct on Data Centres, but it is a voluntary code to which many companies are not signing up nor expecting Cloud providers to comply with. Maybe the government should offer more incentives to businesses to do so.

There were serious concerns too about security of data in the cloud and this is a barrier to higher take-up of cloud services. Even the government, which has encouraged the take-up of mobile devices for its members do not allow them to be backed-up on the cloud due to security concerns.

Who can you trust?

The CIO is rightly concerned about the security issues raised by cloud computing, particularly when the IT user has no idea where the data centres are located and what security measures are in place. Increasingly, though, its younger workers are very open about telling their innermost personal information to the whole world on social media. Is this trust or ignorance of the dangers? Criminals use this social media data to target homes for burglaries. Criminals also make use of cloud computing power to perpetrate criminal activity.

The discussion moved onto the country's energy policy and associated security and cost of supply. There are plans for every home to have a smart meter to monitor energy usage in each household. This will become an essential part of managing the national grid, yet who will trust the energy companies with this personal data? Not only will they know personal energy usage patterns, they will know when people are away from home due to lack of energy usage.

The changing role of the CIO

It was felt that there is a sea-change of technological change happening and it is happening very fast; far too fast for many CIOs to keep pace with. The role of the CIO and the IT department is changing from that of the provider to that of a broker of services. Many departments are making their own policies on important matters like energy provision and cloud usage. The CIO needs to regain the trust of the business to become the honest broker and to apply effective governance of IT and environmental policies.

Business leaders and CIOs will need help to cope with the rapid changes to the IT landscape and its role within the business, so there is an urgent need for education and mentoring for CIOs if this is going to happen.

The discussion ended with some final thoughts.

- Is the iPhone really so smart when it has a 73% higher carbon footprint?
- What is best practice around replacement of IT kit and how long should we keep it?
- Is it time to change the way we depreciate IT assets?
- Does recycling beat reuse?

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About The CIO Partnership

The CIO Partnership is an independent professional services organisation comprising very high calibre executive level practitioners who can transform clients' people, systems, and business to enhance stakeholder confidence and achieve business success. Its seasoned partners are available 'on tap' to work with clients to deliver results quickly and at an affordable price.

Its CIO partners have deep experience in all aspects of business transformational change, are used to operating at board level, and are absolutely focused on delivering client value. They, therefore, aim to deliver rapid results. They also provide education, mentoring and skills transference to improve their clients' businesses.

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About Olswang LLP

Olswang is a pioneering law firm with a distinctive approach to business and an engaging culture. Thanks to its decisive, connected and highly commercial people, it has built an unparalleled Technology, Media and Telecommunications practice, which makes it the firm of choice for true innovation in the UK and internationally. It has also established a commanding reputation for changing the face of business in a wide range of other industries, notably Real Estate.

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