

TECHNOLOGY

IT sector seeks green machines

Companies are focusing on recycling strategies and reducing power consumption, writes Ian Grayson

WHILE the global economic slow-down continues to occupy the minds of players throughout the information technology sector, many are also aware there is considerable work to be done on the environmental front.

Buffeted by falling customer demand on one side and the need to reduce carbon footprints on the other, companies are looking for ways to shore up their green credentials without sending themselves to the wall.

Simon Mingay, an analyst with research firm Gartner, says on the whole the IT industry has "been sleepwalking towards a low-carbon economy". He expects action to increase during the next 12 months, however.

"There is frequently more talking than there is action on behalf of the [information and communications technology] providers," he says in a recent research report. "Most providers still view 'the environment' and 'climate change' as a risk rather than as an opportunity."

IT vendors are focusing their green efforts on two fronts. First, they're working to ensure their development, manufacturing and service provision processes are as carbon neutral as possible. Second, they're striving to make their product offerings as green and therefore as attractive as possible to their customers. Areas of focus include finding ways to reduce the power consumed by the hardware they develop and offering better ways to recycle the kit at the end of its life.

Dell vice-president of power and infrastructure Albert Esser agrees most of the focus of the IT industry is on power, but he says companies need to start thinking more widely. "The green movement at the moment is really all about energy consumption and how this can be reduced," he says. "But we believe it has to be more of an end-to-end consideration and must take into account factors such as recycling."

Esser points to programs such as that run by Dell, where equipment is collected from customers and sent to IT recycling centres. There each box is broken down into its component parts with much of the material melted down and reused in new products.

On the power front, Esser says the industry's focus is on squeezing more computing performance from each watt of power. This is important for stand-alone computers and in the big data centres sitting at the heart of large organisations.

Here a technology known as virtualisation is coming to the fore. One of virtualisation's benefits is that it allows multiple programs to run on a single physical computer, enabling data centres to operate with fewer servers,



Leaving no footprint: Interactive managing director Christopher Ride says the company's entire operation has switched to renewable power

thus saving considerable amounts of power.

"There are also things such as having the ability to wake fleets of PCs up at night to perform maintenance and then put them back into a sleep state," Esser says. "This means they don't have to be left on overnight, again saving considerable amounts of power."

Regardless of such reduction techniques, however, all companies still will require some power to run their IT infrastructures. But this doesn't mean that nothing can be done to reduce carbon footprints.

At Australian IT services company Interactive, management moved the entire operation to green energy.

For the company, which operates five data centres in capital cities across the country, this was a significant step as annual power bills were approaching \$1 million.

Interactive managing director Christopher Ride says the step was not taken for marketing reasons but because of the effect it would have on staff.

"Green power is actually 42 per cent more expensive than regular power, so it was not an insignificant step for us," he says. "But we are a company that focuses very much on our staff because, if they are happy, it permeates everything we do and affects our customers."

Through energy supplier AGL, Interactive purchases power that has been generated by hydro-electric or wind-powered stations. It means the company's power consumption has a zero carbon footprint.

"People won't buy from you just because you are green," Ride says. "They'll feel good about it, but they won't buy for that reason alone."

"But for our existing customers this is

really important as it also helps them with their drive to low carbon operations."

Despite the significant price difference, Ride says costs to customers as a result of the green move have not jumped significantly. When power charges are amortised across several clients, bills are able to be kept at realistic levels.

"I worry about the environment and the impact we have and I know that I feel good about what we are doing, as do every one of the 220 people who work here. Therein lies the real benefit."

Aside from its power moves, Interactive has another initiative that helps staff purchase hybrid vehicles. A cash payment is provided that covers the difference in price between a hybrid and conventional vehicle.

But while there are growing numbers of such examples within Australia's IT sector,

there is still considerably more that can be done.

According to another industry report, while Australian IT companies are slowly becoming more sustainable in their activities, this is tending to occur as a positive side effect of cost reduction rather than because of any dedicated green strategies.

The report, titled Green IT: The Convenient Truth, looks at how IT departments in Australia are responding to the emerging carbon-priced economy.

Commissioned by IT solutions provider Fujitsu Australia, the report found only 40 per cent of companies surveyed have a formal green IT policy in place.

Those without a policy cited lack of perceived business drivers and that the subject is of low priority.

CORPORATE EXPRESS AUSTRALIA

Eco policy well rewarded

WHILE many organisations pay only lip service to improving their green credentials, one Australian company has made environmental protection part of its corporate DNA. For more than 10 years, business supply specialist Corporate Express Australia has sought ways to streamline its operations and reduce its effect on the environment. As a result, late last year the company was named Sustainable Company of the Year 2008 in a competition that covers all ASX-listed companies.

Corporate Express social responsibility manager Jennifer Williams says the company monitors all aspects of its operation to find practical ways in which it can become greener.

Initiatives cover everything from offering products such as recycled paper to ensuring the supply chains that deliver orders to customers are working as efficiently as possible.

Williams says the company recently moved its headquarters into a four-star green-rated building in Sydney's Mascot. Open-plan offices allow more efficient airconditioning and lights, and meeting room audio-visual gear has sensors that turn it off when the room is empty. A product called Neoflex, constructed from a high percentage of recycled rubber, has been used in the floors.

A new distribution warehouse is also paying green dividends. The eight-hectare facility at Erskine Park in Sydney consolidated six buildings into one. The warehouse has been equipped with a range of environmental features such as rainwater harvesting and natural lighting.

The company has also made big changes in the way it prints documents. Working with printing partner Lexmark, it examined internal workflows and found ways to reduce the volume of printed pages produced in the office. "We took simple steps like making duplex printing a standard on all printers," says Williams. "We also replaced personal desk printers with shared devices, reducing the total number in use."

The number of printers throughout the company was reduced by 67 per cent. By replacing large numbers of small devices with fewer, larger ones, the amount of consumables was significantly reduced. Black-and-white printing was also made the default option on printers, further reducing associated costs. The printing initiative has allowed the company to slash paper consumption by about 68 per cent in its 50 locations around Australia.

Williams says such initiatives will be expanded upon by the employee GreenXpress Committee, which meets regularly to discuss new ideas and ways in which the company's environmental footprint can be further reduced.

Examples of other initiatives include a move to ethical sourcing of products where each supplier is asked to adhere to a series of principles relating to the company's overall goals.

"For us the environment is a company mindset," says Williams. "We are always looking for ways to improve operations and make sure we are doing all that we can."

Ian Grayson