

Whole Life Considerations in IT Procurement

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The City of Seattle has long been considered a leader in environmentally sustainable purchasing practices. In recent years, the City has made efforts to extend that culture of whole life responsibility to the purchase of its Information Technology (IT) equipment.

To illustrate that commitment we present case studies of three recent purchasing decisions and examples of our ongoing relationship with the City's main computer workstation vendor.

In the first procurement example, the committee responsible for standardizing on a laptop platform used a list of environmental questions as a part of the vendor evaluations. They asked questions about toxic materials used in manufacturing and contained in the products themselves. They also asked about end of life recycling options and packaging. A list of the questions used is available. Vendors were informed that the environmental considerations would be given equal weight with the features and cost of their products. This provided vendors and the City with a new paradigm in IT purchasing. It gave the City and its vendors an opportunity to consider the whole life of their products and how they affected the planet and those who live on it.

Another IT procurement project is just coming to a close. It is an attempt to standardize on a single vendor for our handheld computer (PDA or personal digital assistants) needs. Again, the City submitted a similar list of environmental consideration questions to the different vendors and emphasized that they would be given equal weight with the other considerations used to select a standard. We learned once again that this is sometimes difficult information for sales representatives to gather. However, with persistence we were able to get a good sampling of relatively complete answers.

The third procurement exercise was a study in which we compared CRT (Cathode Ray Tube) monitors to LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) monitors. We ran tests to compare the relative HVAC (Heating Ventilating Air Conditioning) and electricity use impacts. Then we looked at the overall costs and the environmental impacts. Due to our mild climate and relatively low cost of electricity, the HVAC and electrical use impacts didn't make enough of a difference to justify the increased cost. However, the environmental impacts of CRTs vs. LCDs lead to the decision go to LCDs as the new standard.

Finally, in our relationship with Gateway, Inc. (the vendor we standardized on for all of our desktops and laptops), we have made great strides in raising their level of environmental stewardship. Because they value our business and the good PR that environmental responsibility brings them, they have worked with us extensively to make their products more easily recyclable and to address other environmental issues.

The City of Seattle is proud of the important progress we have made in this regard and hope to share our lessons learned with as many private and public sector procurement professionals as possible.