

How green is IT?

By Chris Gledhill, Managing Director PDMS

I have always fondly believed that the use of IT has the potential to reduce the environmental impact of day to day business processes. There is no doubt that it gives us new communications options and should, in theory at least, reduce our need to travel and also the amount of paper we consume. Please note that I said in theory! On the domestic front there are also some interesting questions, for example does shopping online use more or less energy?

Recently I have been attempting to find some authoritative answers to some of these questions but have met with very little success. Part of the problem is that IT is so engrained in the way we do things these days that it is actually very difficult to identify separately. Also working out the indirect consequences of a new technology on the way we behave can be quite complex. For example, the use of email has dramatically reduced the number of letters being sent (and hence transported) but it has also increased the total volume of written communication, a significant proportion of which is printed out by the recipient.

So in the absence of a simple global answer it is necessary to break the question down further and look at the practical consequences of our use of technology in different situations. We also need to accept that the main impacts are likely to result from changes in the way we behave rather than the technology itself.

How, for example, does IT affect the way amount we travel? As I write this I am working at home, technology makes it easy for me to access most of the systems I need to replicate the office environment at home and remove the automatic requirement to travel to work every day. Not a big deal when all this entails is a short trip around Gansey bay (which I like to pretend I am going to do on my bike someday) but an increasingly important factor for a great many people working white collar roles all over the developed world. For example, according to the United States Department of Labour almost 30 percent of workers in management, professional, and related occupations reported working at home in May 2004.

Modern communications also make it easy to do business with people all over the world and whilst face to face meetings are essential occasionally, I am often surprised at how much gets done by phone and email alone. Whilst it is sometimes argued that the ability to work globally through the internet is also driving up the amount people travel on business, I am not convinced. In the absence of any persuasive evidence to the contrary, I believe that this aspect of modern communications provides environmental benefits as well as overwhelming economic advantages, especially for a place like the Isle of Man which is geographically isolated but has state of the art telecommunications.

With the Christmas shopping season approaching (or nearly over for some smug individuals) the relative merits of shopping on line and on the high street will be up for debate again. Whilst the environmental consequences of this choice don't figure highly for most people, it must be more efficient to sit at home and get Amazon to deliver direct than to drive into town or, worse

still, travel across the water to spend the day shopping, cart the stuff home and then post it anyway. This may be the weakest argument yet for getting out of a shopping trip but I intend to stick to it regardless.

The potential impact of on-line auction sites is also interesting e-bay is credited with increasing the value of our second hand stuff by 30% by creating an easily accessible and efficient market for it. It would be interesting to know how much this will effect the extent to which things are reused rather than thrown away.

The creation of waste is however a major problem for IT, computers, printers, mobile phones and similar products obsolesce quickly and cause a waste management problem. Quite apart from the simple issue of wasted resources there are problems with toxicity and also on a rather different note with data security. There are however an increasing number of schemes available for the recycling or reuse of computer products some of which also have a charitable dimension such as the fonebak scheme for mobile reuse / recycling (www.fonebak.com) available through Manx Telecom.

It is clear even from this brief and speculative enquiry that the use of IT has both positive and negative implications for the environment. The equipment consumes significant amounts of electricity but it also has the potential to increase the efficiency of information and goods distribution considerably. Overall, as with most environmental questions, the answer is probably quite simple. IT is a tool which we can use to increase our efficiency if we want to, but it will only work that way if there are real economic benefits to the user.