

Press Release No. 33/2013

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Defective electronic equipment – accidental or pre-meditated?

Federal Environment Agency commissions obsolescence study

It has happened to nearly everyone at one time or another: one's mobile phone or expensive digital camera becomes defective before the end of its predicted service life and can only be repaired, if at all, at high cost. This phenomenon of a product's natural or artificially influenced wear is called obsolescence. Jochen Flasbarth, President of the Federal Environment Agency (UBA), remarks, "There are many types of obsolescence – built-in, psychological and technical. But no matter how it comes about, the premature wear of consumer goods has a negative impact on our consumption of resources." There has been a great deal of public debate about the phenomenon, especially in connection with electrical and electronic equipment. Since there is a lack of scientifically robust data on the premature wear of consumer goods, the UBA has commissioned research to take a closer look at the issue. The study will examine the question of how long a product must be kept up-to-date and able to operate. The study also seeks to determine the extent to which manufacturers accept premature defects or might even consciously build in weak links, in other words, planned obsolescence. "Since the current debate focuses almost exclusively on individual cases, the main objective of the study is to produce systematic data that can be used to make a sound evaluation of the phenomenon and with which to issue recommendations for action", says Jochen Flasbarth.

There may several reasons why a piece of equipment fails prematurely or is difficult to repair. Examples include the electrolytic capacitors in computers, televisions and other electronic devices which might be underdimensioned, or the materials in mechanical components such as cog wheels in mixers or bearings in washing machines which may not be sufficiently resilient. Another common problem is that the components in tablet PCs or smartphones are glued together and their batteries cannot be replaced. Other than these accounts of experiences there is no systematic information and data at present that allow for a real assessment of the obsolescence phenomenon. The UBA has commissioned a study to the Öko-Institut e.V. and the University of Bonn to improve the scientific basis for the discussion. The project will start in September of this year and produce an interim report next year. The study will conclude in spring 2015.

The study will direct a special focus on electrical and electronic equipment as these products are most often prone to wear out prematurely or become defective. The design and range of these products also undergo radical change. The study will seek to determine whether and how much the average service life and failure probability of these devices have changed over the past few decades. Interviews and feedback from repair shops, test institutes and other stakeholders will be applied in research.

The research project will develop new methods for better testing of product service life. Whereas the service life of lamps can be measured on the basis of established testing standards, it is virtually impossible to measure the service life of a refrigerator under real-life conditions, for example, because of the time span involved. Case studies of three product groups as yet to be selected will collect ample data and identify opportunities for measuring service life. The results of the study will be used by UBA to derive recommendations for ensuring the longest product service life possible as well as quality standards and consumer information.

The study will also investigate how both manufacturer decisions and consumer behaviour affect the average service life of products. Although the choice of design and software might, for example, extend technical service life, the way in which people use a product in everyday life may shorten its service life. Jochen Flasbarth says, "Having the longest possible service and operating life in consumer goods has long been a key issue in product-related environmental protection. The demands made of a product's serviceability and availability of spare parts are standard criteria in the award of the Blue Angel ecolabel."

Further information and links:

The Blue Angel is awarded to durable and easy-to-repair products (press release in German):
http://www.blauer-engel.de/de/blauer_engel/presse/meldungen.php?we_objectID=303

Dessau-Roßlau, 19 August 2013