



The E-waste Solution - By RANJANA MITRA

Community Environment Alliance of Peel's (CEA) Share IT: Computers for Community (Share IT: CFC) is an initiative to provide low-income and disadvantaged families with refurbished personal computers (PCs). Over the next two years, CEA targets to place 1,500 refurbished PCs in the homes of underprivileged children and families. To meet this goal, CEA hopes to receive support from the business community

Electronic waste or "e-waste" includes discarded electronic appliances and products including computers, printers, scanners, cell phones and accessories that are deemed obsolete by the owner. Rapid-paced information and communications technology revolutionizes bringing to market advanced product models with businesses and individuals upgrading their equipment faster than ever. This is leaving a trail of old electronic equipment and gadgets behind – generating environmental and social concerns.

E-waste generation represents the biggest and the fastest growing manufacturing waste in North America and around the world. In the last decade, the average life-span of a computer has reduced more than 50% -- from 4-5 years to less than 2 years today.

While electronic products are apparently safe to use, problems ensue when equipment is not properly disposed of. Computers and mobile phones commonly contain toxic materials that are deemed 'hazardous' upon exposure and pose the risk of contaminating ground water when disposed of in landfills. Materials that pose environmental and health risks include: lead, chromium, cadmium, mercury, brominated flame retardants and PVC plastics. Study findings by Hite's Laboratory of elevated polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDE) in farmed and wild salmon in the West Coast provide a recent example of e-waste potentially leaching from landfills and contaminating waterways and the food chain. PBDE is a toxic flame retardant commonly used in computers and electronic products.

Best e-Waste Management Practices call for embracing the 4Rs in this order: Reduce, Reuse, Recovery, Recycle. Computers deemed obsolete, at most times, have 'useful life' left and can be reused. Many disadvantaged children and under-privileged families in our community are in need of computers. This is where CEA's Share IT: CFC program delivers. By making 'one's waste, another's resource' the program is not only a proactive initiative to address a significant environmental concern, but it also integrates community well-being and economic advantage – elements for sustainable community development.

Since its launch in August 2004, the Share IT: CFC program has helped divert more than 8.9 tonnes of electronic waste from landfill. The program seeks donations of used and/or surplus computers, printers and cell phones from government, businesses and members of the public. Cell phones in any condition, broken or working, of any make or model, are accepted.

There are collection standards and criteria set for equipment for acceptance. CEA accepts individual and business donations of used or surplus computer systems at their Brampton location and hosts Neighbourhood Collection events for residents to collect their used systems. Businesses can also donate at special collection events organized for them.

Once the collected PCs are wiped cleaned of drive data, they are refurbished by skilled volunteer technicians. Thanks to Microsoft Canada, every PC distributed through the Share IT: CFC program receives a licensed operating system. The program also serves community-based non-profit organizations, charities and qualified self employed with refurbished equipment. There is an eligibility requirement and formal application process. The program provides a co-op opportunity for new immigrants and students wanting to pursue an IT career. CEA is a registered, non-profit community organization dedicated to creating a safe, healthy, sustainable community based on core values of "Education, Empowerment and Equality".

Share IT: CFC is made possible through financial assistance from the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

For more information on CEA or Share IT: CFC, please contact Ranjana Mitra, Executive Director CEA, at 905-463-9941 or rmitra@communityenvironment.org.

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