Managing Used Electronics

Electronics have become central to the workplace. Although they simplify and improve many tasks, electronics create an e-waste problem. Rapid innovations lead to millions of devices coming to the end of their useful lives each year. In Wisconsin, many electronics are banned from landfills and incinerators, and these must be reused, recycled or managed as hazardous waste when you are done with them.

This guide will help you navigate laws governing used electronics and manage electronics generated in workplaces, institutions and other non-household settings in a safe, legal and responsible manner.

Each electronic device contains valuable and harmful materials that need to be managed properly.

Legal Requirements for Managing Used Electronics

Lead, cadmium, mercury and other heavy metals are used in many consumer electronics. Steel, aluminum, precious metals, glass and plastics are also in our electronics. If electronics are landfilled, dumped or sent overseas to unregulated recyclers, toxic materials can get into the soil, air and water; workers can be hurt; and valuable materials are lost. For these reasons, there are several laws governing disposal of used electronics.

Wisconsin’s electronics recycling law banned most consumer electronics from state landfills and incinerators. In addition to the electronics specifically banned from disposal (see Electronics Banned from Wisconsin Landfills sidebar), most non-household electronics must be reused, recycled or managed as hazardous waste under state and federal hazardous waste laws.

The combination of these laws can be distilled into this simple message:

When businesses, institutions and other workplaces need to dispose of old electronics, they must send them to:
1) an organization that is willing to reuse them;
2) a legitimate electronics recycler; or
3) hazardous waste management facility.

Most recyclers will work with you to handle all of your electronic devices, whether or not they are banned from disposal. Electronics may be sent to landfills or incinerators only if they are not on the banned list and if you, the generator, can demonstrate through testing that the equipment does not have any hazardous waste characteristics.

Electronics Banned from Wisconsin landfills and incinerators

- Televisions
- Computers (desktop, laptop, notebook and tablet computers)
- Desktop printers (including those that scan, fax and/or copy and 3D printers)
- Computer monitors
- Other computer accessories (including mice, keyboards and speakers)
- DVD players, VCRs and DVRs
- Fax machines
- Cellphones

For more information on laws governing management of used electronics and hazardous waste, go to dnr.wi.gov and search “ecycle.”
Reusing Old Electronics

If your old electronics are in good working condition and you would like to try to resell them or donate them to other organizations, such as schools or non-profits, reuse may be your best option.

Selling used electronics

As an electronics management option, reuse includes reselling your electronics (independently or through a refurbisher/recycler) and donation (directly or after sending them to a refurbisher/recycler for evaluation and/or repair). Go to dnr.wi.gov and search “recycle” to find lists of organizations that recycle and refurbish electronics.

Donating Electronics

Donating useable electronics can benefit both the receiving organization and the organization making the donation. The depreciated value of donated equipment may be tax deductible. Note, however, that many organizations may limit what they accept—for example, only taking computers with certain processors, or not accepting anything more than a few years old.

Complete the steps listed in the Preparing for Reuse sidebar before you contact an organization you would like to donate to. An important part of this process is determining your data destruction needs and contacting an electronics recycler, refurbisher or software retailer to have this done (see Notes on Data Destruction on page 4). When you have completed these steps, contact your intended recipient and verify that they will accept donated electronics,
Managing Electronics as Hazardous Waste

Managing used electronics as hazardous waste is expensive and requires you to follow state and federal hazardous waste rules.

Reuse and recycling are usually the most efficient and cost-effective options. If you would like more information on managing used electronics as hazardous waste, go to dnr.wi.gov and search “hazardous waste.”

Recycling Used Electronics

If your electronics are broken or obsolete and cannot be reused, or if you are not comfortable with reuse because of data security concerns, recycling is likely your best option.

Recycling consists of taking apart each electronic item to recover its reusable materials. It is up to you to choose a legitimate recycler that meets your needs. Go to dnr.wi.gov and search “recycle” to find a list of recyclers.

Safely dismantling electronics is technical work. Not all recyclers take all types of electronics and some have superior environmental performance and certifications that assure proper management of used electronics.

It’s always a good idea to talk with at least two or three recyclers before deciding where to take your materials. Recyclers that hold R2 or e-Stewards certifications are independently audited to ensure they are meeting high standards for responsible recycling and worker safety. Even if recyclers have these certifications, you should still ask questions of all potential recyclers to be sure you are comfortable with how they will handle your equipment.

For suggestions on questions to ask, see the Questions to Ask Potential Recyclers sidebar. Before choosing a recycler, read Important Notes on Data Destruction on page 4. If you have high security needs, you may want to find a recycler that will do on-site data destruction before taking equipment away for recycling. You may also want to visit a recycler’s facility to see its operations and security procedures.

Questions to Ask Potential Recyclers

1. Do you accept e-waste from businesses?
2. Do you accept all electronic items?
3. What do you charge?
4. Do you pick up the items at our location?
5. How do you destroy data?
6. What do you do with the electronics you collect?
7. What steps do you take to ensure worker and environmental safety?
Important Notes on Data Destruction

State and/or federal laws require many businesses, institutions and other organizations to destroy the data the old electronics contain, especially data related to health or student records.

Even if not required by law, it is in your best interest to protect the information on cellphones, computers, tablets, storage devices, printers and other electronics from unauthorized users and criminals looking to exploit personal or financial information.

Whether you plan to resell, donate or recycle your electronics, be sure to ask a recycler or refurbisher about their data destruction practices. Many have trusted methods that use U.S. Department of Defense or other nationally recognized data destruction standards. You can also check for certifications from the National Association for Information Destruction (NAID).

A recycler or refurbisher’s data destruction will help you fulfill data security responsibilities and protect sensitive or confidential customer, employee and business information.

If you will be doing data destruction on your own, check with device manufacturers, operating system providers or electronics retailers for specific instructions or software. Make sure devices are disconnected from “cloud”-based services and websites, especially those that automatically upload or sync files.

Making Responsible Decisions

Choosing a responsible recycler or refurbisher can prevent pollution and expensive cleanups.

If your electronics are mishandled, even after leaving your hands, you may find yourself accountable for them again. Responsible recycling has a cost, and sites like those shown in the photos here are the result of households and organizations not asking enough questions of potential “recyclers.” Taking time to choose a recycler or refurbisher that will handle your devices and data with care will not only enhance Wisconsin’s recycling industry and protect human health and the environment—it will also give you peace of mind.

Resources

The DNR website has many resources to help you find the right solution for your unwanted electronics, including tips for choosing a recycler, requirements for collecting and storing electronics, and lists of electronics recyclers.

Go to dnr.wi.gov and search “ecycle.”

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