'Planned Obsolescence'? Demand 'Planned Longevity'

Public anger across Europe at the mountains of waste electrical products being smashed up for material recycling or for export to Africa has led French regulators to target businesses that plan premature obsolescence into their products [1]. German researchers, on the other hand, had previously concluded there is no evidence that such planned obsolescence exists [2]: it's just that, in a competitive market, customers have the choice to buy good, better and best quality.

Fed up with the short-life span of too many of their electrical purchases, voters are calling on governments for help. Aware of the risks to the single market, the European Commission has taken up the issue of planned product obsolescence and set a budget of €3 million to fully investigate how to identify the culprits [3].

Premature product failure is frequently associated with a single low-value component that cannot be replaced. On occasion, the failed component cannot be supplied or even identified by the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM). And in some cases, because opening the device to repair a critical component may compromise customer safety, OEMs deliberately set out to make it very difficult to do so.

Premature obsolescence encompasses more than component failure. A functioning device becomes useless when software support ends or non-approved devices are installed (as happens with refilled toner cartridges). Some mobile phones are slowed down at every 'upgrade'. The 'Internet of Things' threatens explosive growth in similar life-terminating actions, yet there are also many cases where the provision of data over the internet could deliver improved maintenance and longer product life.

And, added to the mix, some working products are voluntarily abandoned by owners for a host of personal emotional and behavioural reasons – some of which might be triggered by design.

It is apparent that it's not going to be feasible to provide a one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of planned obsolescence, but technical design is probably the most important issue. The EU research proposes to investigate several product categories in the expectation that general principles can be identified.

Purchasing signals approval - not criticism

Perhaps we need to ask a different question, one that leads to a positive action instead of a negative list; one that is designed to identify not planned obsolescence but its opposite: 'How can we identify which products offer planned longevity?'

To answer our own question, we propose setting three product selection criteria. Products that meet these criteria would qualify as being 'designed for longevity'.

The first criterion: has the product been designed 'for remanufacture, refurbishment or repurposing'? This terminology is used in a 2018 amendment to the Wastes Framework Directive which requires Member States to incentivise these activities. This change in policy is a smart pathway to better products and, by extension, to better wastes prevention policies.

The second criterion: does the product on offer stipulate how it can be returned for a life-extending process through 'remanufacture, refurbishment or repurposing' at no additional cost to the user?

The third criterion: does the OEM publish data on the uptake of its product life-extension policy?

The European Remanufacturing Council exists to promote this approach to extended-life products. Its member companies – such as IBM, Lexmark, Volvo, SKF and others – could all put forward their own candidates for this 'positive' list of products designed for longevity.

Conseil Européen de Remanufacture

Remanufacturing is mostly a business-to-business activity and represents 2% of manufacturing activity in Europe. But it could be much larger. In the 1980s, recycling of household wastes was less than 5%; in 2018 it is above 50% in many European countries. Remanufacturing could become as 'normal' to us as recycling. Imagine what could be achieved if it were normal practice for electrical products to go through a life-extending process such as remanufacturing for resale with a guarantee.

Let's hope the 2018 EU research work delivers much more than a framework for identifying poorly designed products that annoy users. The Japanese Top Runner scheme aims to identify the best products - *not* the worst. The French Government might take note.

by David Fitzsimons, Director of the Conseil Européen de Remanufacture

For additional information please contact:

David Fitzsimons, Director of the CER (Conseil Européen de Remanufacture)

The CER is managed by Oakdene Hollins

Oakdene Hollins, Ardenham Court, Oxford Road, Aylesbury, Bucks HP19 8HT
Tel: +44 (0)1296 423915 extn 113
Email: david.fitzsimons@oakdenehollins.com

About Oakdene Hollins:

Oakdene Hollins is a research and consulting business that advises clients on the circular economy and product stewardship. From offices in the UK and Brussels we provide market research and science-based evidence for Government and business clients. The company manages a European knowledge centre on remanufacturing (see www.remanufacturing.org.uk and www.remanufacturing.eu) and has established a new European Council for Remanufacturing based in Brussels (see www.remancouncil.eu). Oakdene Hollins also manages the award of the European Ecolabel within the UK to companies applying to sell their products within the European single market (see www.eu-ecolabel.uk).

Oakdene Hollins is registered to ISO 9001:2015 and ISO 14001:2015, and has gained certification to the Government-approved Cyber Essentials Standard.

For more information about Oakdene Hollins please visit www.oakdenehollins.com

About the Conseil Européen de Remanufacture:

The vision of the European Remanufacturing Council is to triple the value of Europe's remanufacturing sector to €100 billion by 2030. We will bring together businesses from every product sector to share knowledge, and seek changes to policy with the aim of making remanufacturing a normal part of the product life cycle.

For more information about the CER please visit www.remancouncil.eu

References:

[1] *"L'obsolescence programmée se définit par l'ensemble des techniques par lesquelles un metteur sur le marché vise à réduire délibérément la durée de vie d'un produit pour en augmenter le taux de remplacement."* translates as 'Scheduled obsolescence is defined by the set of techniques by which a marketer aims to deliberately reduce the life of a product to increase its replacement rate.' See www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000031044385&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id
[2] Siddharth Prakash, Günther Dehoust, Martin Gsell, Tobias Schleicher, Prof. Dr. Rainer Stamminger; February 2016: *Einfluss der Nutzungsdauer von Produkten auf ihre Umweltwirkung: Schaffung einer Informationsgrundlage und Entwicklung von Strategien gegen „Obsoleszenz"*. See www.umweltbundesamt.de/sites/default/files/medien/378/publikationen/texte_11_2016_einfluss_der_nutzungsdauer_von_produkten_obsoleszenz.pdf
[3] www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT REPORT A8-2017-0214 0 DOC XML V0//EN

Further reading: www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/581999/EPRS_BRI(2016)581999_EN.pdf