

# E-Waste management -An overview

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## Abstract

E-waste (short for "electronic waste") describes surplus, obsolete and broken electrical or electronic devices, including computers, monitors, keyboards, hard drives, USB drives, electronic media, electronics, mobile phones, television sets, and copiers. "E-waste" is a popular, informal name for electronic products nearing the end of their "useful life." "E-wastes" are considered dangerous, as certain components of some electronic products contain materials that are hazardous, depending on their condition and density. The hazardous content of these materials pose a threat to human health and environment. Many of these products can be reused, refurbished, or recycled in an environmentally sound manner so that they are less harmful to the ecosystem. This paper highlights the hazards of e-wastes, the need for its appropriate management and options that can be implemented. Industrial revolution followed by the advances in information technology during the last century has radically changed people's lifestyle. Although this development has helped the human race, mismanagement has led to new problems of contamination and pollution. The technical prowess acquired during the last century has posed a new challenge in the management of wastes. For example, personal computers (PCs) contain certain components, which are highly toxic, such as chlorinated and brominate substances, toxic gases, toxic metals, biologically active materials, acids, plastics and plastic additives. The hazardous content of these materials pose an environmental and health threat. Thus proper management is necessary while disposing or recycling e-wastes.

**Keywords:** Indian Scenario, Effect on health, E-Waste management and management option.

## INTRODUCTION

While the world is marveling at the technological revolution, countries like India are facing an imminent danger. E-waste of developed countries, such as the US, dispose their wastes to India and other Asian countries. A recent investigation revealed that much of the electronics turned over for recycling in the United States ends up in Asia, where they are either disposed of or recycled with little or no regard for environmental or worker health and safety. Major reasons for exports are cheap labour and lack of environmental and

occupational standards in Asia and in this way the toxic effluent of the developed nations 'would flood towards the world's poorest nations. The magnitude of these problems is yet to be documented. However, groups like Toxic Links India are already working on collating data that could be a step towards controlling this hazardous trade. It is imperative that developing countries and India in particular wake up to the monopoly of the developed countries and set up appropriate management measures to prevent the hazards and mishaps due to mismanagement of e-wastes.

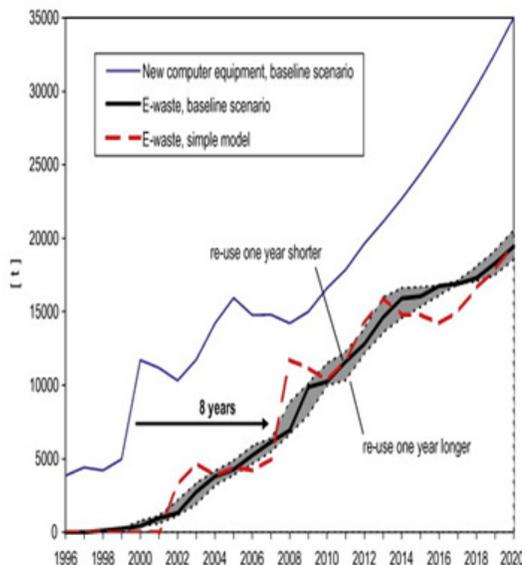


Fig. Indian scenario for E-waste.

**Effects of e-Waste on health**

Table 1. Effects of e-waste on health

Source of e-wastes	Constituent	Health effects
Solder in printed circuit boards, glass panels and gaskets in computer monitors	Lead (Pb)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Damage to central and peripheral nervous systems, blood systems and kidney damage.</li> <li>• Affects brain development of children.</li> </ul>
Chip resistors and semiconductors	Cadmium (Cd)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Toxic irreversible effects on human health.</li> <li>• Accumulates in kidney and liver.</li> <li>• Causes neural damage.</li> <li>• Teratogenic.</li> </ul>
Relays and switches, printed circuit boards	Mercury (Hg)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chronic damage to the brain.</li> <li>• Respiratory and skin disorders due to bioaccumulation in fishes.</li> </ul>
Corrosion protection of untreated and galvanized steel plates, decorator or hardner for steel housings	Hexavalent chromium (Cr VI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asthmatic bronchitis.</li> <li>• DNA damage.</li> </ul>
Cabling and computer housing	Plastics including PVC	<p>Burning produces dioxin. It causes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reproductive and developmental problems;</li> <li>• Immune system damage;</li> <li>• Interfere with regulatory hormones</li> </ul>
Plastic housing of electronic equipments and circuit boards.	Brominated flame retardants (BFR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disrupts endocrine system functions</li> </ul>
Front panel of CRTs	Barium (Ba)	<p>Short term exposure causes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muscle weakness;</li> <li>• Damage to heart, liver and spleen.</li> </ul>
Motherboard	Beryllium (Be)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carcinogenic (lung cancer)</li> <li>• Inhalation of fumes and dust. Causes chronic beryllium disease or berylliosis.</li> <li>• Skin diseases such as warts.</li> </ul>

**Management of E-Wastes**

It is estimated that 75% of electronic items are stored due to uncertainty of how to manage it. These electronic junks lie unattended in houses, offices, warehouses etc. and normally mixed with household wastes, which are finally disposed off at landfills. This necessitates implementable management measures. In industries management of e-waste should begin at the point of generation. This can be done by waste minimization techniques and by sustainable product design. Waste minimization in industries involves adopting:

- Inventory management,
- Production-process modification,
- Volume reduction,
- Recovery and reuse.

**Inventory management**

Proper control over the materials used in the manufacturing process is an important way to reduce waste generation (Freeman, 1989). By reducing both the quantity of hazardous materials used in the process and the amount of excess raw materials in stock, the quantity of waste generated can be reduced. This can be done in two ways i.e. establishing material-purchase review and control procedures and inventory tracking system. Developing review procedures for all material purchased is the first step in establishing an inventory management program. Procedures should require that all materials be approved prior to purchase. In the approval process all production materials are evaluated to examine if they contain hazardous constituents and whether alternative non-hazardous materials are available. Another inventory management procedure for waste reduction is to ensure that only the needed quantity of a material is ordered. This will require the establishment of a strict inventory tracking system. Purchase procedures must be implemented which ensure that materials are ordered only on an as-needed basis and that only the amount needed for a specific period of time is ordered.

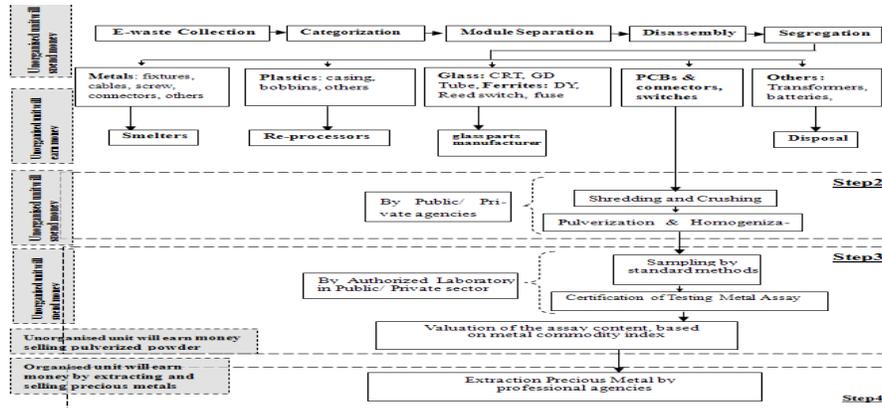


Fig 1. Inventory management

**Production-process modification**

Changes can be made in the production process, which will reduce waste generation. This reduction can be accomplished by changing the materials used to make the product or by the more efficient use of input materials in the production process or both. Potential waste minimization techniques can be broken down into three categories:

- i) Improved operating and maintenance procedures,
- ii) Material change and
- iii) Process-equipment modification.

Improvements in the operation and maintenance of process equipment can result in significant waste reduction. This can be accomplished by reviewing current operational procedures or lack of procedures and examination of the production process for ways to improve its efficiency. Instituting standard operation procedures can optimize the use of raw materials in the production process and reduce the potential for materials to be lost through leaks and spills. A strict maintenance program, which stresses corrective maintenance, can reduce waste generation caused by equipment failure. An employee-training program is a key element of any waste reduction program. Training should include correct operating and handling procedures, proper equipment use, recommended maintenance and inspection schedules, correct process control specifications and proper management of waste materials. Hazardous materials used in either a product formulation or a

production process may be replaced with a less hazardous or non-hazardous material. This is a very widely used technique and is applicable to most manufacturing processes. Implementation of this waste reduction technique may require only some minor process adjustments or it may require extensive new process equipment. For example, a circuit board manufacturer can replace solvent-based product with water-based flux and simultaneously replace solvent vapor degreaser with detergent parts washer. Installing more efficient process equipment or modifying existing equipment to take advantage of better production techniques can significantly reduce waste generation. New or updated equipment can use process materials more efficiently producing less waste. Additionally such efficiency reduces the number of rejected or off-specification products, thereby reducing the amount of material which has to be reworked or disposed of. Modifying existing process equipment can be a very cost-effective method of reducing waste generation. In many cases the modification can just be relatively simple changes in the way the materials are handled within the process to ensure that they are not wasted. For example, in many electronic manufacturing operations, which involve coating a product, such as electroplating or painting, chemicals are used to strip off coating from rejected products so that they can be recoated. These chemicals, which can include acids, caustics, cyanides etc are often a hazardous waste and must be properly managed. By reducing the number of parts that have to be reworked, the quantity of waste can be significantly reduced.

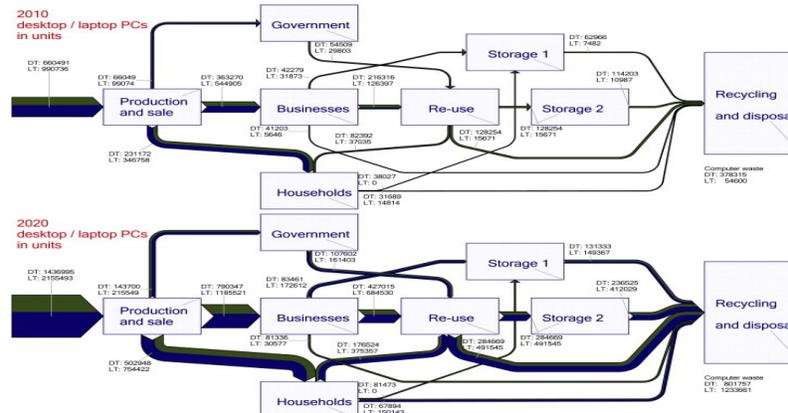


Fig 2. Production-process modification



### Volume reduction

Volume reduction includes those techniques that remove the hazardous portion of a waste from a non-hazardous portion. These techniques are usually to reduce the volume, and thus the cost of disposing of a waste material. The techniques that can be used to reduce waste-stream volume can be divided into 2 general categories: source segregation and waste concentration. Segregation of wastes is in many cases a simple and economical

technique for waste reduction. Wastes containing different types of metals can be treated separately so that the metal value in the sludge can be recovered. Concentration of a waste stream may increase the likelihood that the material can be recycled or reused. Methods include gravity and vacuum filtration, ultra filtration, reverse osmosis, freeze vaporization etc. For example, an electronic component manufacturer can use compaction equipments to reduce volume of waste cathode ray-tube.

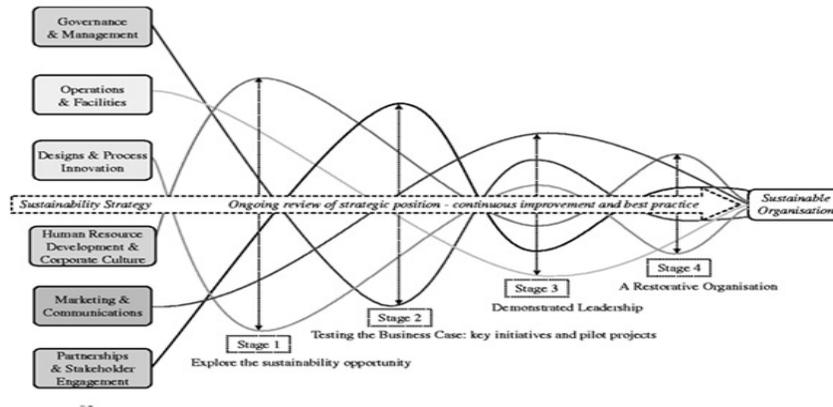


Fig 3. Volume reduction

### Recovery and Reuse

This technique could eliminate waste disposal costs, reduce raw material costs and provide income from a salable waste. Waste can be recovered on-site, or at an off-site recovery facility, or through inter industry exchange. A number of physical and chemical techniques are available to reclaim a waste material such as reverse osmosis, electrolysis, condensation, electrolytic recovery, filtration,

centrifugation etc. For example, a printed-circuit board manufacturer can use electrolytic recovery to reclaim metals from copper and tin-lead plating bath. However recycling of hazardous products has little environmental benefit if it simply moves the hazards into secondary products that eventually have to be disposed of. Unless the goal is to redesign the product to use nonhazardous materials, such recycling is a false solution.



Fig 4. Recovery and reuse

### Management options

Considering the severity of the problem, it is imperative that certain management options be adopted to handle the bulk e-wastes. Following are some of the management options suggested for the government, industries and the public.

### Responsibilities of the Government

- I. Governments should set up regulatory agencies in each district, which are vested with the responsibility of co-ordinating and consolidating the regulatory functions of the various government authorities regarding hazardous substances.
- II. Governments should be responsible for providing an adequate

system of laws, controls and administrative procedures for hazardous waste management (Third World Network. 1991). Existing laws concerning e-waste disposal be reviewed and revamped. A comprehensive law that provides e-waste regulation and management and proper disposal of hazardous wastes is required. Such a law should empower the agency to control, supervise and regulate the relevant activities of government departments.

Under this law, the agency concerned should

- Collect basic information on the materials from manufacturers, processors and importers and to maintain an inventory of these materials. The information should include toxicity and potential harmful effects.
  - Identify potentially harmful substances and require the industry to test them for adverse health and environmental effects.
  - Control risks from manufacture, processing, distribution, use and disposal of electronic wastes.
  - Encourage beneficial reuse of "e-waste" and encouraging business activities that use waste". Set up programs so as to promote recycling among citizens and businesses.
  - Educate e-waste generators on reuse/recycling options
- III. Governments must encourage research into the development and standard of hazardous waste management, environmental monitoring and the regulation of hazardous waste-disposal.
  - IV. Governments should enforce strict regulations against dumping e-waste in the country by outsiders. Where the laws are flouted, stringent penalties must be imposed. In particular, custodial sentences should be preferred to paltry fines, which these outsiders / foreign nationals can pay.
  - V. Governments should enforce strict regulations and heavy fines levied on industries, which do not practice waste prevention and recovery in the production facilities.
  - VI. Polluter pays principle and extended producer responsibility should be adopted.
  - VII. Governments should encourage and support NGOs and other organizations to involve actively in solving the nation's e-waste problems.
  - VIII. Uncontrolled dumping is an unsatisfactory method for disposal of hazardous waste and should be phased out.
  - IX. Governments should explore opportunities to partner with manufacturers and retailers to provide recycling services.

### Responsibility and Role of industries

- I. Generators of wastes should take responsibility to determine the output characteristics of wastes and if hazardous, should provide management options.
- II. All personnel involved in handling e-waste in industries including those at the policy, management, control and operational levels, should be properly qualified and trained. Companies can adopt their own policies while handling

e-wastes. Some are given below:

- Use label materials to assist in recycling (particularly plastics).
  - Standardize components for easy disassembly.
  - Re-evaluate 'cheap products' use, make product cycle 'cheap' and so that it has no inherent value that would encourage a recycling infrastructure.
  - Create computer components and peripherals of biodegradable materials.
  - Utilize technology sharing particularly for manufacturing and de manufacturing.
  - Encourage / promote / require green procurement for corporate buyers.
  - Look at green packaging options.
- III. Companies can and should adopt waste minimization techniques, which will make a significant reduction in the quantity of e-waste generated and thereby lessening the impact on the environment. It is a "reverse production" system that designs infrastructure to recover and reuse every material contained within e-wastes metals such as lead, copper, aluminum and gold, and various plastics, glass and wire. Such a "closed loop" manufacturing and recovery system offers a win-win situation for everyone, less of the Earth will be mined for raw materials, and groundwater will be protected, researchers explain.
  - IV. Manufacturers, distributors, and retailers should undertake the responsibility of recycling/disposal of their own products.
  - V. Manufacturers of computer monitors, television sets and other electronic devices containing hazardous materials must be responsible for educating consumers and the general public regarding the potential threat to public health and the environment posed by their products. At minimum, all computer monitors, television sets and other electronic devices containing hazardous materials must be clearly labeled to identify environmental hazards and proper materials management.

### Responsibilities of the Citizen

Waste prevention is perhaps more preferred to any other waste management option including recycling. Donating electronics for reuse extends the lives of valuable products and keeps them out of the waste management system for a longer time. But care should be taken while donating such items i.e. the items should be in working condition.

Reuse, in addition to being an environmentally preferable alternative, also benefits society. By donating used electronics, schools, non-profit organizations, and lower-income families can afford to use equipment that they otherwise could not afford.

E-wastes should never be disposed with garbage and other household wastes. This should be segregated at the site and sold or donated to various organizations.

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