

Waste not, want not

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IT'S ARGUABLY THE FASTEST GROWING TOXIC PROBLEM IN THE WORLD. LUCKILY, ELECTRONIC GOODS HAVE VALUE NOT ONLY WHEN THEY WORK. JOHAN VAN GRAAN OF NEW EARTH WASTE SOLUTIONS EXPLAINS E-WASTE

BY KERRY DIMMER

E-waste is loosely defined as discarded products that required the use of electricity ... think washing machines, microwaves, entertainment electronics, batteries, fluorescent tubes, cellphones and computers.

The hazardous materials contained in e-waste include toxic materials such as mercury, cadmium, lead, arsenic and PVC which, if thrown into dumping sites, can seep into ground waterways and seriously contaminate the environment and threaten our health.

'The best solution to disposal, given that it's going to take a long time to eliminate toxins from product development, is recycling and getting people and corporations to rethink how they dump these items,' says Johan van Graan, one of the directors of New Earth Waste Solutions (NEWS).

What started out as a viable business opportunity has resulted in a change of lifestyle for Van Graan, who has a background as a car mechanic and entrepreneur.

'What I saw was the potential to build a great business for the future. There's a big role to play in recycling e-waste correctly,' he says. 'But make no mistake, electronic waste is highly specialised and involves a cost factor that has advantages for both recycler and disposer. While we may be in business to make money, and it obviously has benefits for the environment, we are also in the job creation field.'

The company specifically sets out to train and teach the unemployed. 'We're not targeting those street people who are already collecting waste, but those with absolutely no income. We induct them into this business with careful and targeted training that we hope will keep them away from the temptation of criminal activities.'

For those already collecting waste, Van Graan's company provides a branded wheeled bin that identifies the collectors as entrepreneurs of the community in which they're working. The recyclable material is then taken to a central point where NEWS fetches and pays for what is brought.

The company is also involved in educating corporations on how to dispose of e-waste. 'This is our biggest challenge but we are moving forward, albeit slowly. It's not easy to convince the private sector about how to deal with e-waste,' says Van Graan. 'On the other hand, corporations are very easy to convert. We have therefore made it our responsibility to go out and educate, wherever we can, about the implications of e-waste dumping.'

'We call it "The Shock and Horror Show" and it serves to open the minds of people so they can see the value of our business, that NEWS is confronting the environmental issues we have in this country.'

Even schools are being targeted in a drive to prove that aside from the negative environmental impact of e-waste, there is also a financial benefit in collecting such waste for retrieval by NEWS.

Recycling waste products is really a no-brainer. Despite the fact that SA could do more to promote recycling centres for glass, paper, plastic and, more recently, cellphones, we tend to give little thought to our trash once it's out of sight. This is where corporates need to play a bigger role.

'Even though a company may have separate waste bins, how sure are they that the products don't end up in one skip? We often see it ultimately being mixed up in one bin, which defeats the object of the exercise. What they need is auditing and tracking software that will help them trace what happens to their e-waste from cradle to grave,' says Van Graan. 'Just because a logistics company is paid to remove the skips, does not confirm that the waste is actually being taken to approved landfills.'

The advantage of a corporate being able to prove that it has recycled properly translates into a tax rebate. Another incentive are the refund benefits from recycling products that have value, says Van Graan. 'Our process is essentially based on profit-sharing. Therefore, if NEWS takes the responsibility of collecting and recycling a corporate's e-waste, everybody scores.'

Van Graan says NEWS has changed his life. 'Before I joined this business I didn't think about the consequences of throwing away paper. Given my history in servicing cars I didn't have any idea of the impact of throwing away used oil. Now every piece of trash I have, I consider how it could be recycled.'

'We have a lot of projects on the go, many of which are still in the infant stage, but I believe that baby steps will ensure that we continue to manage the issue of e-waste properly. Hopefully our formula will take us further into Africa which is largely considered a dumping ground for e-waste from countries across the board. In the meantime we'll keep on proving that e-waste is vital, viable and profitable for all.' 🌱