ECODESIGN: MAKING EQUIPMENT MORE DURABLE

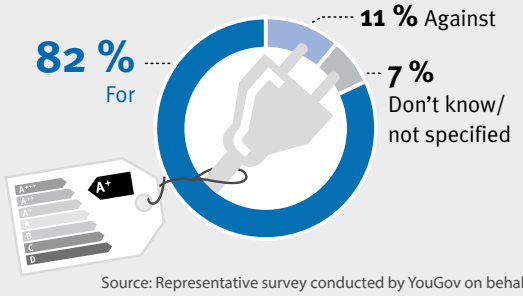
It is a situation familiar to many consumers: as soon as the legal guarantee expires, the washing machine, dishwasher or similar breaks down. And they are often impossible or simply too expensive to repair. Meanwhile, software updates can shorten the useful life of computers and smartphones by making them slower. Extending the EU Ecodesign Directive would help to improve the quality and sustainability of products.

Energy consumption standards for electrical and electronic equipment in the European single market have been in place since 2005 thanks to the EU Ecodesign Directive, which means that new products entering the market are more energy-efficient. As a result, the electricity consumption of EU households in 2016 dropped by 7.9 percent compared with 2008.[1] In future, there also needs to be a stronger focus on the conservation of resources, i.e. products should be made more durable and easier to repair, recycle or to extend them. The first drafts of the relevant regulations for individual product groups are already available. However, they do not yet cover some of the devices that are important to consumers, such as smartphone and laptops.

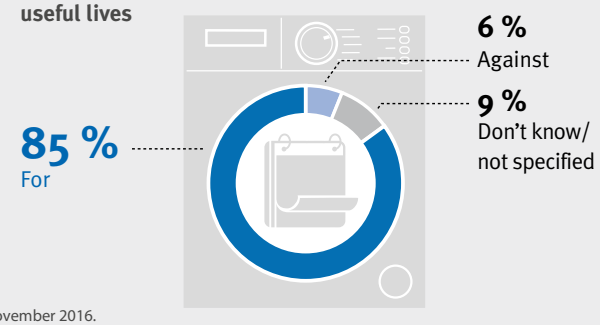
In the next legislative period, the Federation of German Consumer Organisations (Verbraucherzentrale Bundesverband – vzbv) would like to see more product regulations being overhauled with regard to the consumption of resources. This is the only way to ensure that consumers in the EU can buy longer-lasting products with strong green credentials in future.

CONSUMERS ARE IN FAVOUR OF EU RULES ON ELECTRICAL APPLIANCES

Existing rules on electricity consumption (energy efficiency label)



Planned rules on longer useful lives



Source: Representative survey conducted by YouGov on behalf of vzbv, November 2016.

VZBV'S POSITION

Cover relevant product groups: The production of information and communication technology (ICT) devices consumes a lot of resources, but they often have only a limited useful life. Products with such imbalanced value chains need to be the focus of improvements made on the basis of the EU Ecodesign Directive. This particularly applies to smartphones, tablets and computers.

Establish standards for sustainable software: When people hear the phrase 'green IT', they usually think about low-energy and resource-efficient hardware. But software is equally important when it comes to sustainability. Some computers become useless without a (fully) functioning operating system. Moreover, the software installed on a device affects how much energy it consumes. Legislation therefore needs to define for how long security and software updates must be available at individual product group level.

Introduce rules for products that do not consume energy: Products should generally be durable, repairable and recyclable, which is why the European Commission needs to urgently examine further product categories for which rules on resource conservation can be introduced, for example categories like office and home furniture, shoes or leisure articles.

FACTS AND FIGURES

82 percent of consumers support the European Commission objective to define standards for low electricity consumption by electrical appliances. 85 percent would also like to see specified standards for products durability.[2]

Three out of ten consumers are forced to replace their existing hardware due to the incompatibility with the new software.[3]

From an environmental perspective, it is important to pick long-lasting products in order not to add to the growing mountains of waste, especially when it comes to discarded electrical goods. Germany is ranked number one in the world in this respect, producing two million tonnes per year (22.8 kilograms per person).[4]

Mobile phones are short-lived. Their average useful life is given as approximately two years. On average, however, consumers want to use their phones for around four years.[5]

BROKEN TODAY, THROWN AWAY TOMORROW?!

Franka and Boris study medicine. As they have done before, they meet in the cafeteria on campus to prepare a presentation together. Boris, now in the second year of his degree, is astonished to see that Franka's laptop looks pretty bashed-up, despite not being that old. The hinge that is supposed to be holding the lid is missing. Instead, the laptop is held together with sticky tape. Franka explains that spare parts are no longer available for this laptop. Boris is relieved to see that at least it still works. After all, important information for their presentation is stored on it.

Making modern technology more durable

The 22-year-old student has more bad luck with his mobile phone. The device's charging socket has suddenly stopped working, even though the phone is barely three years old. At a repair shop, he learns that nothing can be done. He cannot afford a new smartphone at the moment as he is a bit short of money. A friend gives him her old one, but it has a cracked screen. Boris assumes that replacing the screen will not be too expensive, but he is wrong. Fitting it would cost 180 euro, because everything in the smartphone is firmly glued in place. He is angry that smartphone and other ICT devices, which are so resource-intensive to produce, often have only a short lifespan. This is creating more and more electrical waste, which is damaging to the environment. He would like to see reliable information that shows not only a smartphone energy efficiency but also its durability.

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1 Energy-efficient products, German Federal Environment Agency, 2018, https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/daten/private-haushalte-konsum/konsum-produkte/energieeffiziente-produkte#textpart-1.
2 YouGov on behalf of vzbv, 2016, https://www.vzbv.de/sites/default/files/downloads/2017/04/06/yougov_eu-oekoverordnung.pdf.
3 KantarEmnid 2017, https://www.vzbv.de/sites/default/files/downloads/2017/06/01/umfrage_-_haltbarkeit_und_reparierbarkeit_von_produkten_0_gewaehrleistung.pdf.
4 Baldé, C.P., V. Forti, V. Gray, R. Kuehr and P. Stegmann: The Global E-waste Monitor 2017, United Nations.
5 All the Rage or Take It Easy? Melanie Jaeger-Erben and Tamina Hipp, Centre for Technology and Society at the Technical University of Berlin, Obsolescence Junior Research Group (ed.), 2017.

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