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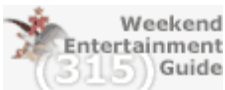
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ESF alumna discusses recyclable technology

By Brian Oppenheim

Published: Wednesday, March 3, 2004

Many environmentalists are concerned that the increasing amount of used computers are building up with nowhere to go. Some corporations, though, are planning to help consumers recycle their old computers.

Diana Bendz, the IBM director of Environmentally Conscious Products, lectured to about 30 people about recycling, computers and their effect on the environment Tuesday in Baker Hall.

Bendz's lecture, titled "Environmentally Friendly Computers: New concepts of Design, (Re) Use and Recycle," was sponsored by the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, the Graduate Student Association and the women's caucus organizations.

During her 34 years at IBM, Bendz has developed the company's plan for the design, manufacture and disposition of environmentally conscious products. She came back to SUNY ESF, her alma mater, to discuss the ways computers can both help and hurt the environment.

Although computers are made of potentially environmentally hazardous products and use a great deal of electricity, they have the possibility to help the environment, she said.

"Cars are much more sophisticated; they're saving more fuel now because of computers," Bendz said. "Look at the Internet and e-mail. There are now more e-mails being sent than mail, cutting down on paper used."

But Bendz warns that even though computers can help the environment, it doesn't mean they haven't contributed to some environmental problems.

The increase of computer equipment as well as consumers regularly replacing computers every two to three years has caused a stockpile of obsolete machines that are hard to recycle. In 2002, there were more units of obsolete computers than new computers shipped to consumers, Bendz said.

"We're proliferating this equipment and then it's outdated," she said.

Bendz suggested that the computer industry could make their products easily upgradable or effortlessly recyclable, but both options are not economically viable. It currently costs \$25 to recycle a computer, she said.

But Bendz was not optimistic that manufacturers would cover the cost of recycling or that consumers would be willing to pay for it.

"Unless there's regulation by the government to add that tax, it won't happen," Bendz said.

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The business of recycling is also unprofitable, and 40 percent of recycling companies have less than 10 employees. IBM loses \$1 million to \$2 million a year on recycling their own computers, Bendz said.

Although recycling may be a difficult and profitless task, Bendz sees hope for the future.

"More companies are sharing ways to recycle," she said. "Maybe when recycling becomes profitable all companies will do it."

Diana Kuehn, an assistant professor at SUNY ESF and faculty adviser to the women in scientific and environmental professions seminar series, was pleased with Bendz's presentation.


"Recycling is a very serious issue," Kuehn said. "There's a need for people to be aware of how computers should be recycled, and some people are still not aware of it."

But Don Hughes a SUNY ESF graduate student in chemistry, thought that even more work could be done at IBM and other technology companies.

"I think they're making an honest effort to improve recycling and I give them a lot of credit for that," Hughes said. "But the difficulty is that these companies need to overcome the planned obsolescence of the computers."



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