

PRESS RELEASE

Berlin, 19.06.2018, SUSTAINUM – Institute Berlin presented on June 8th its results from the research project Longevity & Obsolescence in Product Development (LOiPE) to representatives of consumer protection, trade associations, environmental protection, trade unions, science and companies. The closing event, entitled "Planning Obsolescence", focused on the question of how companies and consumers consciously plan and control the service lives of their products. The final event was supported by other speakers from research and companies.

Survey shows no indication of planned premature obsolescence

The event focused on the results of the survey of people involved in product development. "A large part of the mainstream tries to uncover planned obsolescence by proving weak points in the product, but this does not explain sufficiently whether something is really planned or not", explains project manager Jörg Longmuß and continues: "our approach was therefore to ask the alleged planners directly". The results of the confidential survey are clear: "Our discussions in Germany could not reveal any indication of deliberately planned premature obsolescence," says Longmuß, but restricts: "at the same time, however, it became clear that the limitation of service life through obsolescence is not caused by a deliberate weakening of individual parts, but by the conditions under which they are developed and produced. Due to indications like changing working conditions, cost and time pressures as well as dependencies in the supply chain mean that engineers and developers are not always able to implement the quality they themselves desire. We'll call it systemic obsolescence."

Planned obsolescence as a tool for various purposes

"We soon realized that there are very different ideas about planned obsolescence in practice. However, many companies are not even aware of the term," says Erik Poppe, who carried out many of the surveys as a research assistant. In particular, he criticizes the very one-sided idea that the planning of obsolescence serves only to shorten product lifetimes: "The active planning of obsolescence is a necessary prerequisite for long lifetimes. If you want to build a 100-year-old washing machine, there is no getting around active obsolescence planning." He therefore advocates particularly a value-free understanding and an open dialogue: "The planning of obsolescence is a tool that can serve various purposes. Shorter product lifetimes can also be an indication that far too little attention is paid to obsolescence as a subject of product planning".

However, the two researchers do not rule out the possibility of deliberately shortening or accepting short lifetimes, because the survey only related to Germany.

The role of the consumer

The guest speakers were Melanie Jaeger-Erben from the TU-Berlin, who pointed out in her lecture that consumers make their own contribution to the devaluation of products and that the obsolescence of a product is therefore not an objectively definable state.

Harald Wieser, who conducts research in England, gave the participants an insight into current consumer research and emphasized that obsolescence and questions of life expectancy are not in the foreground for the majority of consumers.

Narrow scope in the companies

Christian Dworak of BSH Hausgeräte GmbH made clear in his contribution that large companies have a very strong interest in closing the loop: "We would prefer to have every part of the product life cycle under control," complains, however: "the conversion of well-established processes in the company and the development of new business models is risky and takes time.

„The implementation of a product lifecycle management is complex, but worthwhile“, Kai Poppe can confirm. He is technical manager at LOGANDO Display & Media Solutions GmbH, a fast-growing technology rental company with a focus on displays and video technology: "In the beginning, there were a few restraints that have to be recognized and overcome - today we record almost 100 percent device availability in some product groups.

How can consumers get what they need?

At the subsequent panel discussion, Ines Oehme (UBA), Bjoern Bartels (Amsys GmbH), Wolfgang Neef (TU Berlin) and Christian Dworak (BSH GmbH) discussed the possibilities for greater longevity and durability.

Wolfgang Neef makes clear that the findings of systemic obsolescence should under no circumstances serve as an excuse for omitted action, because the apparent constraints such as cost pressure and time constraints are man-made. Industry expert Bjoern Bartels notes, however, that the increasing use of short-lived consumer electronics is also becoming a massive problem for durable capital goods and calls into question the dependence on key industries such as semiconductor production abroad. Ines Oehme advocates in particular the further development of reliable rules and agreements on service life and reparability within the framework of the Ecodesign Directive and product information, so that manufacturers will in future be more subject to due diligence obligations. Christian Dworak was optimistic and refers to the successful cooperation and implementation of product requirements to date.

Wolfgang Neefs received great approval and applause in conclusion and demand: "Engineers should again be allowed to do what they want and hopefully be able to do."

About the LOiPE research project

The research project Longevity & Obsolescence in Product Development (LOiPE) took place between 2016 and mid-2018. The project was financed by the Hans Böckler Foundation and actively supported by IG Metall.

Web: <https://sustainum.de/project/en/longevity-and-oboescence/>

About SUSTAINUM

As an independent institute, SUSTAINUM performs consulting and research projects for companies from numerous industries, non-profit organizations and public institutions - and this already for more than 10 years.

As a research institute, SUSTAINUM designs innovation, organization and communication processes and accompanies social, political and economic actors on their way towards sustainability.

Web: <https://sustainum.de/en/>

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- Web: <https://sustainum.de/en/planning-obsolence/>

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