Submission to Australian Government Productivity Commission Right to Repair Inquiry

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Robert Helstroom, 30 January 2021

In describing the breadth of applicability and the range of repair complexities, the Issues Paper of the Right to Repair Inquiry covers the matter very well.

As a private individual who, over many years has sought to repair common household electrical, electronic and mechanical appliances, it is clear to me that repairability of such items is highly variable and is becoming more and more limited as goods become cheaper and as the design increasingly discourages dismantling and repair in favour of expediting low-cost assembly using adhesives and heat welding. Even the most basic appliances, such as vacuum cleaners or pedestal fans, are commonly designed with a view that repair will never be an option and their low price will justify their consignment to landfill after an unacceptably short life.

Without doubt, the future will see further increases in complexity and the consequent erosion of repairability as, for example, microcontrollers with embedded firmware find their way into almost every manufactured product. Exponential growth in the "Internet of Things" and microelectronics means that more technology will continue to be packed into items ranging from a simple light-switch or thermostat to air-conditioners and private vehicles. A century ago, the road vehicle maintenance & repair industry managed to handle the transition from horse and buggy to simple automobile. This was achieved with little assistance from manufacturers because the required knowledge was shared and not highly specialised. In contrast, adaptation as vehicle technology evolves will nowadays be near impossible as computer-controlled electric drivetrains take over from internal combustion engines and cars become increasingly reliant on embedded propriety software that will eventually facilitate self-drive operation.

Three enduring ways to tackle the environmental impact and waste of resources stemming from our disposal of "stuff" are therefore proposed in this submission.

1. **A "Repair Star" rating system**
   Common consumer items such as portable heaters, fans, mobile phones, washing machines, refrigerators, video monitors, shavers, microwave ovens, electric kettles, toasters, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, lawnmowers, air-conditioners, etc could carry a "Repairability Star" rating similar to the Energy Star and Water Star rating systems that are already in place. This proposed Repairability Star would reflect qualities such as:

   - Accessibility to repair information.
   - Ease of dismantling and replacing key components.
   - Access to repair facilities – either OEM-based or other providers.
   - Estimated cost of common repair – such as as battery replacement in a mobile phone.

   A Repairability Star sticker would be affixed to the item and displayed at the point of sale. It would have the objective of encouraging consumers to consider purchase of repairable and durable items rather than simply those of lowest price.

2. **Product Standardisation**
   Various common components of most consumer goods are already standardised. For example, the hose connections of washing machines or the power plug on a mains-powered appliance. Sadly however, certain manufacturers of IT equipment have purposely developed their own proprietary hardware for reasons that appear to be concerned with locking their customers into the brand. As well as exposing the customer to added expense, this leads to unnecessary duplication, incompatibility of equipment and consequent waste. I can think of no remedy for this other than to use Government purchase contracts to discourage the acquisition of equipment using proprietary rather than industry-standard technology.

3. **Mandatory "Take Back" schemes**
   This is somewhat outside the scope of the Right of Repair Inquiry, but there is little doubt that, should manufacturers or retailers be required to take back their end-of life products, there would be a greater focus on producing products that were less burdensome in terms of repair, reuse or recycling. As discussed in the Right to Repair Issues Paper, "Product Stewardship" has been only voluntary and limited to e-waste. Whilst there is no doubt that manufacturers and retailers have data to show the scheme has led to improved recycling, the predominance of discarded appliances in dumped and council clean-up waste shows there is clearly much room for improvement. As an incentive, it is suggested that a small percentage of the price could be assigned to a "take back" reward to be redeemed by the purchaser when they return the appliance to the place of purchase for recycling.

I trust this submission might be of interest to the inquiry.

Sincerely,

Robert Helstroom