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PENTHOUSE OF THE
LAS VEGAS BUILDING
IN HOUSTON

PHOTO BY
JAMES LINDEN

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THE
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Today's goods, tomorrow's resources

Find out how the circular economy provides an alternative model for companies to pursue sustainability goals.

Faced with the challenge of allocating finite resources to meet the needs of a growing population, businesses are turning to alternative models of resource consumption that will ensure sustainability in the long run. The circular economy is a model that has gained interest in recent years.

According to a report by the World Economic Forum and British charity Ellen MacArthur Foundation, a circular economy is an industrial system that is regenerative by intention and design. It emphasises the use of renewable energy, elimination of toxic chemicals, as well as reduction of waste through better design of products, systems and processes in business models.

"What it means, in short, is that contrary to the traditional linear model where goods are made, used and disposed of, we want to make sure that used products are being recaptured so that wastage is kept to a minimum," says JD Kasamoto, general manager for Ricoh Asia Pacific's Service and Environment Division. Ricoh Asia Pacific, which supplies office automation equipment such as copiers and facsimile machines, as well as data processing systems, is one of a handful of companies in Singapore that have embraced the concept of a circular economy.

In the "take, make, dispose" approach, companies extract materials to make a product, which is then sold to a consumer, who discards it when it no longer serves its purpose. Advocates of the circular economy aim to reverse this process by attempting to emulate the natural world, in which nothing is left to waste as one organism's waste is a source of sustenance

for another organism; and nutrients ingested are eventually returned safely to the earth without any need for landfills.

In view of a circular economy, not only traditional business processes but also the relationships between suppliers, producers and eventual end-users of products need a relook. It is not just about reducing waste – it's about eliminating the very concept of waste by recognising that everything has value and avoiding under-utilisation of resources and assets. It would also mean greater efforts to introduce renewable, recyclable or biodegradable materials that can be used in repeated product life cycles.

Apart from the environmental benefits, transitioning to a circular economy could lead to over US\$1 trillion (\$1.4 trillion) in annual savings by 2025 for the global economy, according to the report by the World Economic Forum and Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITMENT

Ricoh is a forerunner in reducing the environmental impact of its products at all stages of the product life cycle from procurement, manufacturing, sales and logistics to usage, recycling and disposal.

Kasamoto says: "We try to close the loop by having a recycling process in place. We bring back the products we make and 'feed them back' into the production cycle." He adds that Ricoh's sales units are all required to monitor their sales of copiers, toner bottles and cartridges, and keep track of their recollection ratios. This forms part of their key performance indicators.

"Our machines are relatively big and

A circular economy is an industrial system that emphasises the use of renewable energy, elimination of toxic chemicals, as well as reduction of waste through better design of products, systems and processes in business models.

technology companies. A beer company in the United Kingdom, Toast Ale, collects discarded bread from supermarkets as a substitute for a third of the malted barley used in its brewing process.

Belgian company Cirkle, which combines a home delivery service for groceries with a waste collection service, processes and sorts the waste it collects; reusable items go to charities and the rest to recycling companies. For instance, Cirkle sells cooking oil to its customers and then collects the used oil. The used oil is then sold to a company that makes biodiesel, with proceeds going to a charity. The biodiesel produced is used to run the company's delivery vans, thus ensuring a closed loop process.

Braiform, one of the world's largest suppliers of clothes hangers, has in fact gotten rid of all its production facilities and become a global leader in reused hangers, which account for 80 per cent of its worldwide sales. Hangers that cannot be reused are shredded and made into new products. About 5 per cent of its hangers are made from its own waste stream.

Other ways in which companies can participate in the circular economy include using recycled materials and renewable fuels, and switching to a rent instead of sell model. Rather than going it alone, companies can pool resources under a shared umbrella organisation to carry out recycling on their behalf. They can also rope in their neighbours, such as those in an industrial park, to build a circular ecosystem. It is only when more companies come on board that the circular economy model can reach its full potential. ■

cumbersome, and costly to dispose of, so it makes sense for Ricoh to take care of disposal for our customers. In Thailand, which is one of our biggest markets in the region, we have built a refurbishment plant. Our second-hand copiers have the same five-year warranties as new ones. So we have effectively doubled the shelf lives of our machines," says Kasamoto. He adds that more than 50 per cent of Ricoh's copier parts are designed to be reusable.

Google is another global company that embeds circular economy principles into its operations and business culture by circulating products and components through different loops of the usage cycle to optimise resources. Decommissioned servers from its data centres are sent to a central hub where they are dismantled and broken down into their usable components, such as motherboards, flash devices, hard disks, and memory modules. These are then refurbished and used in the building of remanufactured servers, which made up 19 per cent of the servers deployed by the company in 2015.

Such practices need not be limited to