

# The Obsolescence Minefield

## A Guide to Tackling Disappearing Products

*Do you pride yourself on customer support?*

*Do your customers demand support periods of 5 years or more?*

*Are your competitors winning orders because they understand support strategies better than you do?*

*Do your materials management and production schedules suffer through out-of-date or obsolete part availability?*

**If you answer YES to any of the above questions, then you need to read this booklet**



Published by the Component Obsolescence Group  
Unit 3, Curo Park, Frogmore, St. Albans, Herts AL2 2DD, UK  
Tel: +44 (0)1727 876029 Fax: +44 (0)1727 871336  
e-mail: [admin@cog.org.uk](mailto:admin@cog.org.uk) Web: [www.cog.org.uk](http://www.cog.org.uk)



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*This publication is one of a series of booklets published by the Component Obsolescence Group, all of which are recommended as essential reading for organisations or individuals tasked with obsolescence management. This series includes:*

**The Date Coding Minefield** – **A Guide to Component Traceability through the Date Code**

**The Supply Chain Minefield** – **The role of the Distributor in Managing Obsolescence**

**The Long-Term Storage Minefield** – **A Guide to ensuring your equipment can still be built and maintained in years to come**

*Acronyms and terms used in the booklet are given their full meanings on Page 20. The section also provides definitions of other acronyms and terms associated with the field of obsolescence*

# Introduction

**Without a background in the subject, obsolescence can be a minefield for those working across all sectors of industry. It is an area where ignoring the risks can lead to unpleasant surprises and/or major problems. If you read the questions on the front cover of this booklet and decided to read on, then the activity in which you are involved is almost certainly a part of this minefield.**

Try a few more questions:

***What is the true nature of obsolescence?***

***Are you aware that you have, or may have, an obsolescence problem?***

***Could you deal with an obsolescence problem if it arises?***

This booklet looks at the background to obsolescence; defines the problems related to the past, present and future of obsolescence; and shows that the only way to tackle the problem is to **MANAGE IT** – *Reactively* if there is no other solution or, preferably, *Proactively*. There may also be times when a combination of both approaches could be the best solution.

The way forward is shown, step by step, in a way that will allow you to come to terms with the management processes, tools and communication links involved. It is these that will ultimately allow you to be able to demonstrate that you understand and are managing the risks of obsolescence.

But before we get into the detail, it is useful to restate two dictionary definitions:

**Obsolescence**, noun, *going out of use or fashion, becoming obsolete q.v.*

**Obsolete**, adjective, *not used any more, (from the Latin *obsoletus* = worn out)*

Beware these definitions! Neither provides a true description of the problem under discussion. The word ‘obsolescence’, as used in this booklet, refers to components, items or materials that are no longer available from their original source(s). The reason for the non-availability could have many causes: the original manufacturer is no longer in business, the manufacturer can no longer make it, the manufacturer has no desire to make it, or technological advances have turned the product into a part of history etc.

But a need may still exist!

**So now read on ...**

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***This booklet was written with the co-operation of members of the External Liaison Group of the Component Obsolescence Group (COG.) The inputs from Alun Jones, Graham Goring, Steve Grist and Ian Blackman are particularly appreciated.***

***The publication was edited by Roy Atterbury. Original Cartoons by Steve Padgham.***

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# THE PROBLEM

## Background

**Obsolescence is related directly to a documented part or service that is no longer available from the original provider. But it may be available from a different provider, stock may still be available in the marketplace, it may be available under a different designation, or a new product may meet the required specification. In non-military applications, the problem is typically placed in the lap of the end user.**

Have you ever gone to a car dealer and found that the touch-up paint for your model is no longer made? Are you a vintage car enthusiast who cannot find tyres to fit your vehicle?

What about your old stereo system that cannot be repaired for the lack of a single part? In such cases, it will often be better and cheaper simply to buy a new appliance, look round a car accessories shop to see whether your paint is now made by one of the many specialist manufacturers of 'obsolete' paints, and search the web or contact fellow enthusiasts about your tyres.

Obsolescence is all around us – so much so that many of us accept it as a part of our lives. Indeed, we live in a consumer society that is driven by obsolescence. Mobile 'phones, for example, typically become obsolete every 1 or 2 years – long before their useful life has ended. Why? Because it is the constant introduction of new technology that drives the market and new 'phones are produced almost on a monthly basis with more and more gimmicks and/or facilities. In the consumer environment as a whole, a 5-year life for a product would be considered to be more than adequate.

But what about products and systems that have to be kept going at all costs – not just for 5 years but with their

service life measured over several decades?

*Concorde*, for example, is something of an antique in aviation terms, the financial constraints placed on Health Authorities require the majority of medical scanners in hospitals to have a life cycle of 20 years plus; the control systems in nuclear power stations have probably been in service for 20 years or more, the *Eurofighter* was designed to be in service for 60 years - and so it goes on.

Obsolescence is normally signalled when a provider has declared a given end-of-life period for a product or service and a notice to this effect has been issued. The obvious intention is to enable customers to react to the notice. Unfortunately, these warnings are not always seen by those who are most concerned with the withdrawal of a product or service or, at worst, they are simply ignored or their importance goes unrecognised.

Even with the benefit of the warning, it will be of little value unless you know the exact nature of your current and future requirements. Only then will you be able to react appropriately.

*Because it is electronic components or assemblies that tend to suffer most from obsolescence problems, these products will tend to be used as examples throughout this booklet. In most cases, however, the procedures described will apply equally for other areas unless otherwise indicated. And if there is any doubt about the threat of obsolescence, in the electronic industry alone, around 2000 devices are withdrawn by their manufacturers EACH MONTH.*

***This trend cannot be taken lightly!***

**This booklet has been sponsored by the following companies:**



*IHS, Willoughby Road, Bracknell, Berkshire RG12 8DW, UK  
Tel: +44 (0) 1344 404434 Fax: +44 (0) 1344 424971 Web: [www.ihs.com](http://www.ihs.com)*



*Winslow Adaptics Ltd, Brecon Enterprise Park, Brecon, Powys, Wales, UK  
Tel: +44 (0) 1874 625555 Fax: +44 (0) 1874 625500  
Web: [www.winslowadaptics.com](http://www.winslowadaptics.com)*