

Navigating obsolescence

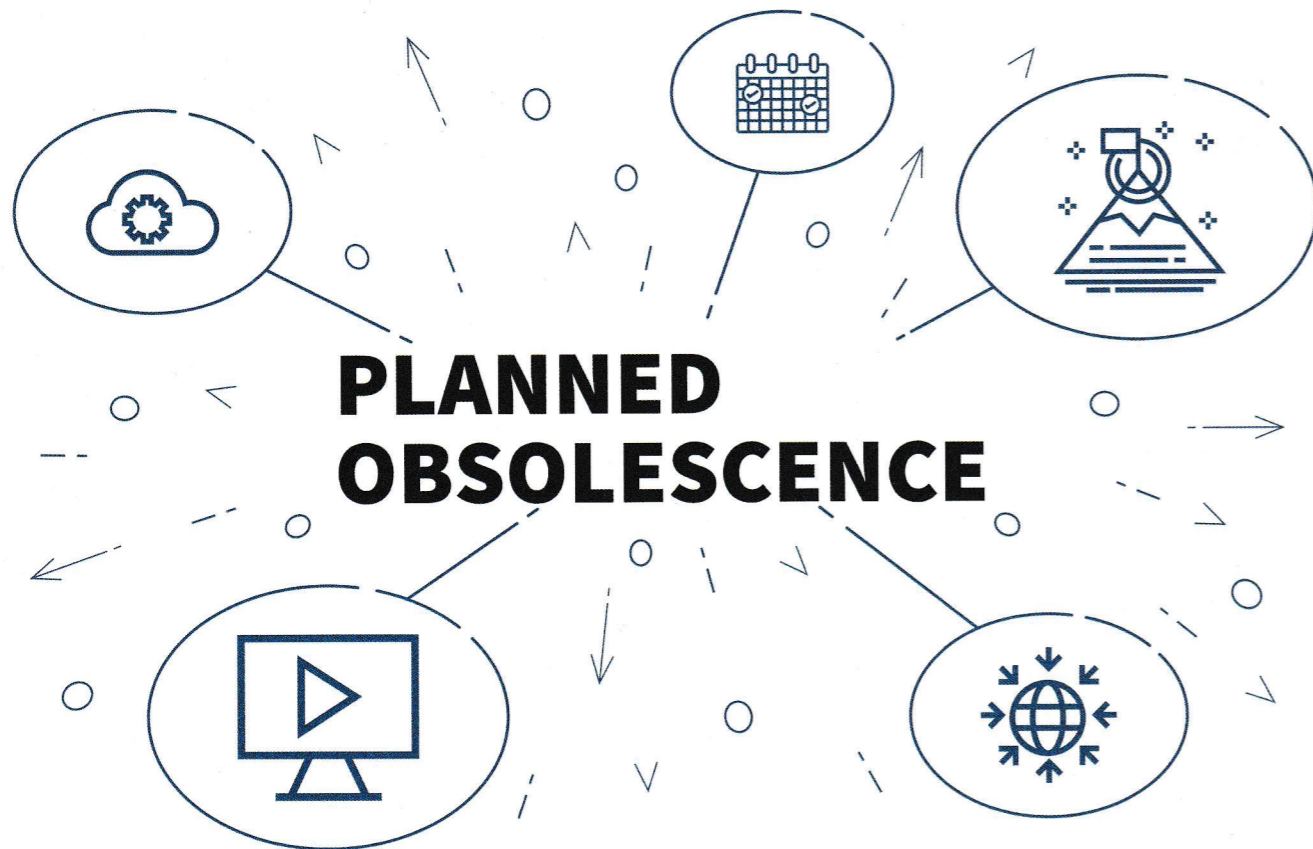
Force Technologies' MD, Karen Salmon, steps buyers through some of the ways of managing obsolescence

Obsolescence is a minefield for the uninitiated or unprepared purchasing professional. Those of us with 30-years' experience still find the prospect of solving a problem daunting, with increasing counterfeit products and decreasing

original products available through reputable channels.

Some customers are looking for a stop-gap solution to bridge between current requirements and board level redesign. This is because enough of the application's

ICs have reached EOL or obsolete status and a board level re-spin/requalification becomes the viable approach. Other customers have a comprehensive idea of future requirements and can take advantage of a planned approach.



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Force Technologies' MD, Karen Salmon

The first attempt by customers looking for a short-term solution is frequently the end-of-life (EOL) or last-time-buy (LTB) approach. Over the past five to seven years, franchised distributors have become more pro-active regarding advising customers of EOL notices. Many years ago, I remember a large distributor admitting to only going back two years when informing customers of EOL/LTB notices. This admission caused angst in the defence industry which maybe only manufactures a board once every five to 10-years. Manufacturers were candid about their notices, often burying them in their website's technical data.

Thankfully, this has improved, although I suspect larger distributors have archived many records for good, the numbers being so vast. Many customers now have inhouse teams whose only function is to check the status of parts and continually monitor them.

Before embarking on a redesign, several options are available, starting with aftermarket solution providers who offer a range of solutions from up screening to die assembly: both under licence and independently.

Die suppliers either package themselves or use third-party subcontractors to assemble the die in the original package. A lot of OCM die, previously graded according to market

demand, is still available. If it is not available, there are a few alternatives: die reclaiming is now recognised and accepted by the DOD and MOD; using an alternative manufacturer's die and screening for pertinent parameters; working with the OCM to restart a line and produce wafers for the long-term solution; or using a redesign company to redesign the die.

Using alternative parts on adaptors is also a next-step solution when the original part is still available but in a different footprint or package. These can also be up screened on the adaptor if required.

Further down the obsolescence path is the opportunity to redesign just the obsolete component and have a brand-new working part for many years to come. There is also the chance to incorporate other functions that may be going obsolete or may improve the semiconductor's overall performance. FPGAs that have gone obsolete can be converted into ASICs and again other functions can be included.

Finally, the last resort is a complete board redesign. With all the other solutions available (planned for rather than left to the last minute) a redesign is not always necessary nor cost effective.

Many software tools and industry groups hold a wealth of experience and knowledge about the obsolescence market including the International Institute of Obsolescence Management (IIOM), the Anti-Counterfeiting Forum, DMSMS Knowledge Sharing Portal and ERAI. Along with many working groups in the UK, Europe and USA these organisations strive to provide mitigation and strategies for dealing with obsolescence and counterfeit electronics.

There is a long way to go and obsolescence is here to stay but rest assured there are always solutions, you just need the courage to find them.

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