
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Built to fail?



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Welcome to 6 Minute English, where we bring you an interesting topic and six items of vocabulary.

Catherine

And all in just six minutes, of course. I'm Catherine.

Neil

And I'm Neil. Today – is technology built to fail? And are we throwing away too much technology and harming the planet? Catherine, tell me - how old is your TV?

Catherine

My TV has just had its fifth birthday.

Neil

And your mobile phone?

Catherine

It's about two and a half.

Neil

So you do like to have **gizmos**, but not necessarily the latest.

Catherine

Exactly.

Neil

Gizmo – nice word. A **gizmo** is a small piece of technology – otherwise called a gadget.

Catherine

And of course I'm not alone in buying gadgets from time to time. They actually keep on getting more advanced – so people keep buying new ones.

Neil

Technology also gets cheaper and cheaper. In fact, many gadgets are more expensive to fix than replace.

Catherine

And this means that we throw a lot of gadgets away – but how many?

Neil

See if you can guess: how much electronic waste is thrown away every year globally? Is it...

- a) 420 tonnes,
- b) 4.2 million tonnes or
- c) 42 million tonnes?

Catherine

And I do actually know the answer to this one, so I'm gonna keep quiet, just for once!

Neil

Ah, first time for everything! So, to bring us back to our main point. Is technology no longer built to last? Let's hear first from Professor Tim Cooper who is an expert in **sustainable** consumption and production at Nottingham Trent University in the UK.

Catherine

Sustainable, by the way, means 'able to continue over a long period of time'. We often use it to mean 'able to continue without causing harm' – like environmental damage. What's the problem with mobile phones?

INSERT

Tim Cooper, Professor of Sustainable Consumption and Production at Nottingham Trent University

The classic example of this is the mobile phone, where, for example, screens are glued into the product. Now they know that if there was a **screw** there, the consumer could easily, when that screen cracks, which is obviously a very common problem with mobile phones, **unscrew** it and put a new screen on. They don't. They know perfectly well that that would be a way in which mobile phones would last longer. They don't want that, they want you to replace your mobile phone every year or two.

Neil

Professor Cooper says that mobile phones' screens crack often – and generally when that happens people buy a new one.

Catherine

That's partly because mobile phones' screens are glued on rather than **screwed** on. Now a **screw** is a piece of metal like a nail but with a raised twisted part – and we use screws to join two things together.

Neil

The verb form is the same – to **screw** – and the opposite is to **unscrew**. If you could **unscrew** a cracked screen and then replace it, there'd be no need to buy a whole new phone, he says.

Catherine

He thinks that generally, people have **lowered their expectations** when it comes to how long things should last.

Neil

Expectations is a good word – an **expectation** is a strong belief something will happen. **Expectations** can be raised or **lowered**.

Catherine

Or managed – to 'manage your **expectations**' means to not let your expectations get so high that you then become disappointed when something fails.

Neil

Yes, by way of an example, Professor Cooper says that his parents' washing machine lasted for 37 years. These days, they last between five and ten.

Catherine

Yeah. And we don't see electrical products as an investment in the same way that people used to. We now worry that what we buy today will become **obsolete** tomorrow.

Neil

Obsolete – no longer valid or useful. And also – he says we've become so used to cheap products that we don't want to spend more on good quality.

Catherine

So what's to be done?

Neil

Cooper suggests that if we can afford it, we really should try to buy higher quality products. And manufacturers should put labels on their products saying how long they are designed to last.

Catherine

An interesting idea. Cooper says that over 2m pounds worth of electrical goods are thrown away each year in the UK. He calls it a "**throwaway culture**".

Neil

A culture in which we throw things out much more easily. Not good for the planet either. So – will you try to keep your mobile for a bit longer, or are you already tempted by the latest model, Catherine?

Catherine

I'm happy with the one I've got, but I'm gonna protect the screen very carefully.

Neil

Yes, a good idea. Maybe this will help you make up your mind, though. I asked how many tonnes of electrical waste are thrown away globally.

Catherine

And I said I know the answer – it's actually 42m tonnes, according to a UN report back in 2015. The figure could be a lot higher now. And as you know – my mobile isn't very heavy – so 42m tonnes is an awful lot of phones! While we try to picture that, let's quickly run through today's vocabulary. So first up was **gizmo** - a small piece of technology – a gadget.

Neil

Smartphones, smart watches, fitness trackers, sat navs – all **gizmos**!

Catherine

We had **sustainable** – able to last or continue. We talk about **sustainable** energy, **sustainable** economic development...

Neil

The opposite would be **unsustainable** development... And another pair of words – to **screw** and to **unscrew**.

Catherine

A **screw** is that little metal thing like a nail that we use to join things together. You can **screw** shelves into the wall, you can **screw** furniture together...

Neil

And when you move house you **unscrew** it. Three more: to **lower your expectations**. What have you lowered your expectations about?

Catherine

Err, so many things... Becoming a millionaire - I don't think that's going to happen. Or I could say a company has lowered its **expectations** about performance over the next five years.

Neil

Yes – another one looking ahead into the future – I'm pretty sure my computer will be **obsolete** in ten years. It will no longer be used – it will be out of date.

Catherine

I just urge you, Neil, when you do get a new one – please recycle this one responsibly. We already live in a **throwaway culture**.

Neil

Yes – it's pretty **unsustainable**. Now, before your laptop or phone becomes **obsolete** – I suggest you check out our Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube pages! Bye for now.

Catherine
Bye!