

Finding a Use for Old Computer Equipment

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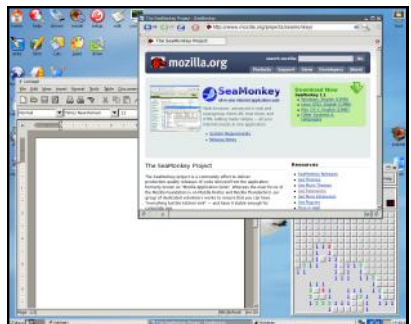
I've got some old computers, monitors and printers that I don't use anymore. What should I do with them?

Whatever you do, avoid dropping computer and electronic waste into the garbage with the rest of your trash, as many of these items contain hazardous materials which can damage the environment. This *Tech Talk* will present some of the alternatives available to you.

Option One: Reuse the equipment at home.

You may be able to use an older computer as an **network file server** with little or no modification. All you really need is a an inexpensive router (\$40 to \$50) and an easily networkable operating system (such as a recent version of Windows, Macintosh OS X or Linux.) You can use this as a central location to save documents, photographs, digital music files and videos. In addition, since it's all in one place, it becomes a breeze to back up your important information.

If your computer is four to eight years old, you may be able to breathe new life into it by **installing a lightweight and nimble operating system**. A minimalist Linux distribution like Puppy Linux (puppylinux.org) would be well suited to aging equipment. Even better, Puppy Linux and most other Linux variants are free to download and use. They can do most anything a typical user needs to do (word processing, Internet browsing, file serving, image editing, etc.), even on a computer past its prime.



Installing Puppy Linux can put some spring into your aging PC's step.
Image Credit: upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2a/PuppyLinux-ScreenShot-070216-1.png

Option Two: Sell your equipment.

If your computer gear is of still relatively recent vintage, you may be able to sell it on eBay (ebay.com) or craigslist (chicago.craigslist.org) for a decent price. Laptop computers seem to hold value fairly well, especially if they are from premium manufacturers like Apple.

Option Three: Donate your equipment for reuse.

Donating your computer gear to a charitable organization can make a difference in the lives of those less fortunate and help to break down the digital divide between those who have access to technology and those who do not.

There may be tax benefits associated with your donations, so check with your accountant or tax preparer in advance if you go this route. Here are a few organizations which accept working, relatively current computer equipment:

- **National Cristina Foundation**

- Call 800-CRISTINA (1-800-274-7846)
- www.cristina.org
- Note: donor pays shipping costs. Equipment should be less than 10 years old.

- **Gifts in Kind America**

- Call (703) 836-2121
- Email: ProductDonations@GiftsInKind.org
- www.GiftsInKind.org
- Note: Also accept donations of other office equipment

- **Computers for Schools**

- Call (800) 939-6000
- www.pcurr.com/pcsforschools.asp
- Note: organization refurbishes computers and provides them to schools for 1/3 of the retail cost.

- **Reconnect**

- reconnectpartnership.com
- Uses Goodwill Industries for drop off locations.

Option Four: Recycle your equipment.

Equipment that is broken, completely outdated or otherwise unusable can be recycled through these programs:

- **Staples:** The office supply chain Staples provides extensive computer equipment recycling services . There is a recycling fee of \$10 for most pieces of computer equipment, though Dell products can be recycled for free. See www.staples.com/sbd/content/about/soul/recycling.html for details.
- **Best Buy:** Best buy also charges a \$10 fee for recycling, though they provide a \$10 gift card in exchange. Up to two items per day per household can be recycled in this program. Note: you must remove the hard drive(s) from your desktop or laptop computers before Best Buy will take them for recycling. For complete details, search for *recycling* on Best Buy's website (bestbuy.com.)
- **Apple:** The Apple Store will recycle your old equipment for free if you buy a new computer from them. They will also provide a prepaid shipping label and packing materials for a \$30 fee if you aren't buying a new computer. See apple.com/recycling/computer/ for more information.
- **Hewlett Packard (HP):** Hewlett Packard will recycle your HP or Compaq brand computer equipment for free, and will accept other brands for a "modest fee." They will even pay you a small amount for your old equipment if they determine it has value. See hp.com/united-states/hho/buyback-recycle/index.html for details.
- **Sam's Club:** Sam's Club members may check online to see whether their old computer equipment has any trade-in value (to be paid as a Sam's Club gift card.) If not, they will recycle it for free. See www.econewonline.com/samsclub to get started.
- **Costco** has partnered with Gazelle.com to allow you to recycle certain computer and electronics items in return for a Costco cash card. Check costco.gazelle.com to see if your computer is eligible.
- **Abt Electronics** in Glenview, IL offers computer recycling for a \$5.00 fee. Check their recycling page out at www.abt.com/green/Recycle.php3.
- **The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency** publishes a list of sites accepting computers and other electronics for recycling at www.epa.state.il.us/land/electronic-waste-recycling/recycler-list.html.

Preparing your computers for sale, donation or recycling

It's a good idea to try to remove all of your personal information from your computers before they leave your home. Merely deleting your files is not sufficient, as deleted files can be recovered relatively easily.

The best way to protect yourself is to use a program which overwrites the free space formerly occupied by your deleted files.

- With **Windows** computers, a free program called **Eraser** (*eraser.heidi.ie*) will give you peace of mind, as it obliterates the sensitive information from your hard drive by overwriting it several times in a row.
- For **Macintosh** computers running OS X, **Disk Utility** (preinstalled on all recent Macs) allows you to erase free space on a disk volume and to overwrite it seven or 35 times with zeros, effectively making it impossible for anyone to recover your data after you transfer ownership.

Closing Remarks

In many cases your computer may still have a few good years of life left, whether in your home or elsewhere. If the computer is too far gone, recycling is your best option, as this will keep toxic chemicals and compounds from leeching into the environment.

If you have questions, comments or suggestions, you can visit me at the Reference Desk, contact me via email (moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info), or call me at 630-986-1976 ext. 225.

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