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Before You Throw It Out ...
What to do with your old PCs

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Michael Celiceo found that it was harder than expected to part with his seven-year-old computer.

After buying a new **Dell** Inc. system earlier this year for about \$800, he posted his old PC, monitor and printer on the Craigslist.org¹ classified-ad site. The asking price: \$400, well below the \$2,000 he had paid in 1998. But there were no takers. So Mr. Celiceo, a public-relations consultant in Burlingame, Calif., dropped the price to \$300 and then to \$250. Finally, he gave up and decided to chuck the thing, but a neighbor told him throwing it in the trash would violate local regulations. And the municipal waste-disposal company said it would charge \$25 to recycle it.

As Mr. Celiceo learned, the rapid evolution of computer technology carries a big downside: It's hard to find someone to take an old clunker off your hands. With new machines getting ever faster and cheaper, a device that cost thousands of dollars only a few years ago is now virtually worthless.

Most buyers won't pay hundreds of dollars for a used machine when they can get a new one for almost the same price in some cases -- and a more powerful one at that. Schools and charities often won't accept donations of older machines that can't run current software. And many municipalities prohibit dumping aged machines because they can contain high levels of lead, mercury and other toxins.

As if that weren't enough to worry about, users have to make sure that any valuable or confidential information has been removed from the system before they get rid of it. Software companies warn that data left on a secondhand computer could be accessed by identity thieves.

In the end, Mr. Celiceo sought out charity recipients for his machine -- but even there he had problems. At his first stop, the local elementary school, "the lady looked at me and said, 'We only use Macs. Find a high school,'" he recalls. Finally, the local high school accepted the system. Mr. Celiceo says he plans to take a deduction of "a couple hundred bucks" on his tax return.

For others in Mr. Celiceo's position, here's a guide to selling, recycling or donating your old PC -- as well as getting your personal information off the machine before you give it away.

SELLING

If your computer is less than five years old, you might be able to recoup enough to justify trying to sell it. A year-old computer in good condition will bring about 60% to 70% of the original cost, estimates Ryan Laber, of Durham, N.C., who sells other people's goods in online auctions for a commission. The return drops rapidly in models older than that, particularly for desktop computers.

In general, laptops sell more readily than desktop systems, partly because of the higher cost of shipping a desktop system and partly because new laptops are much more expensive than new desktop systems. Still, even a laptop that's more than four or five years old can be tough to sell, according to Eric Gazin, of Los Angeles, who runs a trading-assistant business like Mr. Laber's.

But if you're lucky, you might get a few bucks for an older machine, particularly if it's a laptop. Karl Wiley, director of **eBay** Inc.'s computers and consumer-electronics category, notes that some of the site's users buy older computers to obtain a particular component. Kyle Johnson, a trading assistant in Laurel, Md., recently paid \$5 at a wholesale auction for a 12-year-old ASG laptop with a black-and-white screen and sold it on eBay for about \$35. He also got about \$50 for a five-year-old IBM ThinkPad with a broken screen, twice what he paid for it at another auction.

Dave Mason, computer consultant and host of the radio show "ComputerTalk with Dave Mason," says local listings such as Craigslist or computer-club publications can be a good way to find buyers, particularly if you don't want to ship the machine. Computer retailers often have pamphlets promoting these clubs. But to get top dollar, eBay is hard to beat, Mr. Mason says. "You get the biggest audience and great exposure to tech types who are looking for a good deal," he says. "You're more likely to get more for your computer, because the auction feeding frenzy starts as soon as a potential buyer sees other bids."

eBay's site has a page -- eBay.com/rethink⁴ -- filled with advice on selling, donating and recycling computers and other electronics. Click on "sell" in the box labeled "Get Involved," then click on "computer value guide" for an estimate of how much you might recoup from your machine. However, eBay's guide doesn't list computers with chips predating the Pentium III or Apple's Power PC G3, which came on the scene in 1999. For an estimate on older models, you'll have to find another site, such as UsedComputerEvaluator.com⁵.

DONATING

In general, if a computer is too old to sell easily, it may also be too old to donate. Many charities, such as the National Cristina Foundation (Cristina.org⁶), which provides used computers to students with disabilities or from poor communities, don't accept computers with chips older than an Intel Pentium II or Macs predating

the Power Macintosh. Such machines often aren't powerful enough to run current software.

Still, if a computer is fewer than five years old, a school, nonprofit or household could get another two or three years out of it, says Jim Lynch, program manager for computer recycling and reuse at CompuMentor, a San Francisco-based organization dedicated to technology assistance for other nonprofits. Once again, desktop systems are generally less sought after than laptops. But you may be able to unload the monitor, at least: Until recently, with the advent of flat-panel screens, technology for monitors didn't advance as rapidly as PC microprocessors. So older monitors can hold their own against newer models. The international nonprofit World Computer Exchange (WorldComputerExchange.org⁷), for example, accepts working color monitors that are up to 10 years old.

Techsoup.org⁸, CompuMentor's technology Web site for the nonprofit sector, lists nonprofits that accept computer donations. Some -- but not all -- Goodwill Industries International Inc. agencies also accept computer donations; it's best to call your local Goodwill first and check.

Mr. Lynch advises taking computers tagged for donation, particularly if they are five years old or newer, to a refurbisher, an outfit that will wipe the computer's memory clean and get it in shape for the charity recipient. He suggests looking for one that has been authorized by **Microsoft** Corp. The software giant provides Windows 98 and Windows 2000 software to CompuMentor at no cost. CompuMentor then distributes the software to about 400 refurbishers across the country for use in donated PCs. You can find a Microsoft-authorized refurbisher at Techsoup (Techsoup.org/mar/mars.asp⁹).

Larger refurbishers often charge fees, usually less than \$20, to get the computer in shape and pass it on. Smaller organizations, such as the Online Policy Group (WorldPolicy.org¹⁰) in San Francisco, rely entirely on voluntary cash donations to fund their refurbishing services.

Bear in mind that Hurricane Katrina has created new demand for donated computers, even older ones. Nancy Jo Craig of the Capital Area Corporate Recycling Council (CACRC.com¹¹), a Microsoft-authorized refurbisher in Baton Rouge, La., says her organization is working with the Baton Rouge Area Foundation to provide displaced people and organizations with technology. "I know in other times, people say, Pentium II, Pentium III, but right now, I think anything is useful," says Ms. Craig.

Mr. Lynch notes that Microsoft-authorized refurbishers around the U.S. will direct donated computers to relief for hurricane victims.

RECYCLING

National legislation on computer recycling is pending, but in some cities chucking computers in the trash is illegal. Local regulations can change frequently, so call your municipal waste company for details.

The potential danger from junked computers lies in the monitors, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Like televisions, they contain lead, and the newer flat-panel models also have mercury. These substances are safe while the product is being used, but can pose a risk to sanitation workers and the local environment if the device is improperly junked.

Exactly how much risk is open to debate. H. Scott Matthews, assistant professor of civil and environmental engineering and public policy at Carnegie Mellon University, has been researching electronic waste since 1991. He can't point to any example of damage from junked computers in the U.S. But many environmental groups argue that toxic-waste damage may take years to appear. So they urge consumers to recycle their machines safely instead of simply throwing them away - even if it's not required by local rules. The groups also argue that consumers should find out where their machines will end up. Many U.S. recyclers ship junked machines overseas to be dismantled, where safety practices aren't as strict, and the danger of contamination is greater.

So where can you turn to recycle your old machine? There are depots in much of the country that accept computers, sometimes free of charge. For a listing, check EIAE.org¹², the Electronic Industries Alliance's state-by-state guide to recycling options. The site also lists cities that offer curbside pickup for safe disposal of computers and other electronics.

But there's no guarantee those machines won't be sent overseas for recycling. The EIA suggests asking the recycler about its practices, or calling environmental regulators about the recycler's record. The Computer TakeBack Campaign, a consortium of health and environmental groups, has a guide to recyclers that have signed a pledge to adhere to certain practices, including not exporting junked computers to developing countries. You can find the list at ComputerTakeBack.com/the_solutions/recyclers_map.cfm¹³.

Meanwhile, Dell, **Hewlett-Packard** Co. and **Gateway** Inc. accept computers, of any brand, for recycling and pledge not to send them to developing nations.

Dell charges \$10 for an air bill that covers the cost of shipping a desktop computer, monitor or laptop computer. H-P will pick up packaged hardware at your door within two days; the fee is \$21 for a laptop and \$46 for a desktop computer and monitor. H-P will then send you a coupon of up to \$50 toward the purchase of a new H-P product. Check HP.com/recycle¹⁴ and Dell.com/recycle¹⁵ for more details.

If your system has a Pentium III or more recent processor, you may be able to trade it in to Gateway for credit toward a new Gateway product. If it's older, Gateway

will recycle your system for a fee. The company also offers cash to take back recent, working Gateway computers. The fees and payments vary according to model. For details, go to Gateway.eztradein.com/gateway/¹⁶.

Best Buy Co., meanwhile, has recycling events on certain dates in a few metropolitan areas, listed at BestBuy.com/recycling¹⁷. Best Buy may charge a fee for large items deposited at these events. The retailer says it works only with companies that break down computers into their basic components -- plastics, metals and glass -- within the U.S.

REMOVING TRACES

Although the threat of snoops accessing the data on your old PC is remote, it's still a good idea to remove any financial data or personal files such as family photos.

Refurbishers generally wipe the hard drive before doing anything else to your machine, to avoid the risk of illegally passing on unlicensed software. Some refurbishers, such as the Computers for Schools Association in Chicago, provide donors with a document that lists the date and time their hard drive was wiped, and how long the process took.

Still, it may be a good idea to wipe your hard drive yourself, because refurbishers aren't required by law to delete files, says Mitch Altman of the Online Policy Group, a Microsoft-authorized refurbisher in San Francisco. Several companies, including Blancco Ltd., McAfee Inc. and WindsorTech Inc., make programs to wipe your hard drive clean or transfer the data to another computer. Prices start at \$23. EBay's "Rethink" page and the Techsoup site list free products that will also do the job, including Darik's Boot and Nuke (DBAN.SourceForge.net¹⁸) and Active@KillDisk (KillDisk.com/eraser.htm¹⁹).

As a final safety measure, Mr. Laber, the trading assistant in Durham, suggests you smash a junked machine's hard drive with a hammer to make sure thieves can't reactivate it and steal personal data.

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