

# Don't add old computers to growing e-waste pile



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It's hard not to think about environmental waste when you're carrying obsolete computers out of your office. Each machine and monitor is likely filled with mercury, cadmium, brominated flame retardants and lead; plus, each hunk of plastic probably still performs the job it was originally designed to do. Nonetheless, upgrades must be made in order for business to compete.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the United States trashed 157.3 million computer products in 2007. Fortunately, 18 percent of those CPUs, monitors, notebooks, keyboards, mice and peripherals were recycled, and we're headed in the right direction because that percentage is higher than in previous years. Unfortunately, the annual mass of computers reaching the end of their useful life is also increasing, so while throwing them all in a dumpster might be the easiest approach, it would have serious consequences to the

Putting off the issue — shoving the old machines into storage — just makes things worse because a computer decreases in charitable value every month it sits idle. Ada Onanuga of Computer Troubleshooters in Quakertown summed it up when he said, "If the computers are in a good state, they can be donated."

There are many resources for donating good machines. Still, no one wants a 10-year-old clunker.

Postponing the upgrade itself is no good either since that costs money every day through sacrificed efficiency. Under the right conditions, a new machine will run faster, perform better and require less energy to operate,

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For instance, bulky servers eat square footage and produce a lot of heat while new processors can handle twice the work, which increases productivity while reducing space and air

conditioning needs.

Another example: Old, lead-filled cathode ray tube monitors consume power continuously while new monitors power off when not used. Even transportation demands can be reduced when remote access and video conferencing technologies are implemented.

life cycle is not the wisest environmental or business management choice, especially if the obsolete machines are disposed of properly. When it's time to upgrade your computer system, consider these e-waste reduction actions:

## THE GREEN SCENE

- **Buy right.** High-end machines last longer because they can be pushed harder. They are often more adaptable to growing technology, and schools and charities are more likely to take the computers when you're finished with them. Consider buying products from manufacturers whose management systems are ISO 14000 certified, have implemented take-back programs, or have shown a commitment to phasing out harmful chemicals and reducing technology's impact on the environment.

- **Return it.** Take-back programs are the result of a shift towards manufacturer accountability for the e-waste problem. Essentially, participating corporations will accept your old machine for free, but only if it is sent back upon purchase of a new model. In some cases, buying from a company that offers a take-back can be the simplest solution.

- **Donate.** Your trash just might be a needy child's treasure — as long as you remember to send along the power chord.

- **Ask Employees.** It's possible that a few of your employees want the old computers for use at home, so it can't hurt to ask. A lottery system will work

machines than interested employees.

- **Recycle.** If it's already too late for donation or take-back, then take advantage of local hazardous waste collections or recycling options. Here, too, it pays to first do a little homework.

Beware of enterprises that illegally export the toxic materials to undeveloped nations for improper dismantling or incineration by low-income or child workers.

Whatever destination your computer reaches, it's imperative that the data it contains is destroyed first. According to Ada, "reformatting the hard drive is not good enough." It's best to leave the issue up to the IT experts to ensure that the destruction process is complete so you don't give away trade secrets or customer identities.

A great resource for take-back, donation, or recycling programs is the EPA's Web site: [www.epa.gov/epawaste/conservation/materials/recycling/](http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/conservation/materials/recycling/). There you will find links to sites like [www.MyGreenElectronics.com](http://www.MyGreenElectronics.com) and [www.Earth911.com](http://www.Earth911.com). There are so many resources available now that we should have no trouble in raising the 18 percent recycling rate to a healthier level.

America has been thoughtfully applying the advice of reduce, reuse and recycle to its purchases for a number of years. When it comes to computers and other electronics, these solutions are our best hope in preventing our technological progress from collapsing into the desolation of our ecosystem.

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