

Digital Dinosaurs: What Should You Do with Your Old Computer?

By LISA CANNON

Your computer. Five years ago it was the pinnacle of digital technology. Today it is gathering dust in your closet. Back then, it was everything you ever wanted in a PC. Now, it is the laughingstock of the Obsolete Computer Museum (<http://www.obsoletecomputermuseum.org/>). You want to get rid of it, but you don't want to just throw it away. But what can you do with obsolete computers? They're big, they're bulky, and they're full of chemicals that could be hazardous to the environment if they were introduced into a landfill.

A Toxic Problem

The best-case scenario is to prevent computers from hitting the landfills at all. That's

where a lot of obsolete technology has been ending up, and it's a problem that's already reaching critical mass. According to a report from the National Safety Council (<http://www.nsc.org/ehc/epr2.htm>), 70% of all major appliances manufactured each year are recycled, but only 6% of the annual production of desktop computers are recycled. The problem is not just the tremendous volume in landfills. It's also the components of computers that release toxic substances, which leach into soils and threaten ground water.

Computers are cornucopias of potentially hazardous chemicals. Most computer components contain nickel, lithium, cadmium, chromium, and mercury. Not only that, but there is

more and more plastic being used in computers, and less precious metals. Plastics, unlike metals, aren't worth much to recyclers. And some of the plastic is polyvinyl chloride (PVC), which is perhaps the least environmentally friendly plastic when composed of virgin materials, since it is viewed as a contaminant to the PET (<http://www.napcor.com/toolbox/whatisPET.html>) recycling stream.

Computer monitors are the worst offenders of all. There's a reason why they're so heavy—they contain lead to protect users from radiation. A standard glass cathode ray tube, or CRT, contains up to eight pounds of lead. Because lead-coated glass particles can contaminate ground water, a standard monitor can be classified as hazardous waste. This year, Massachusetts became the first state to

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ban CRTs from landfills, and other states are following suit.

The problem is compounded by the fact that recycling facilities haven't caught up with technology. The electronics recycling industry lacks the capacity to handle the large amounts of computers being discarded every year. Glass recyclers aren't equipped to handle glass from computer monitors. Because the amount of plastic being used in computers is increasing, computers are more difficult to recycle, since plastic has little value and requires separation through an expensive process. Other computer components, such as keyboards, mice, and storage drives, are equally difficult to break down into recyclable components.

Recycling electronics means determining which parts can be sold intact and which must be scrapped. For example, monitor manufacturers can use cathode ray tube guns, and service companies (businesses that contract with computer makers to manage warranty programs) can use parts from old product lines. After salvageable materials have been taken from old

National Directory of Computer Recycling Centers

Alameda County Computer Resource Center is a non-profit computer recycling organization that provides computers to those in the community who would not otherwise have access to them. The computers that are placed with recipients are refurbished through the Computer Repair Internship Program. In the process, the Center ensures that obsolete, nonworking, or no longer usable electronic equipment does not end up in a landfill.

- Alameda County Computer Resource Center
5725 International Boulevard., Building D
Oakland, CA 94621
Mailing Address:
P.O. Box 150759
San Rafael, CA 94915
Phone: 510-434-1325
Fax: 510-434-1327
Web site: <http://www.accrc.org>
Email: accrc@accrc.org

Computers for Learning streamlines the transfer of excess federal computer equipment to schools and educational nonprofit organizations, giving special consideration to those with the greatest need. Equipment is shipped for free via commercial transportation systems acting in partnership with Computers for Learning.

- Computers for Learning
Phone: 202-501-3846 / 888-362-7870
Web site: <http://www.computers.fed.gov>

computer systems, the leftovers—electronic scrap and mixed plastics—are hard to find a home for.

Newer Is Better, Right?

The rush to own the latest, greatest computer—one that

matches the tangerine furniture or graphite walls—is also to blame for the glut of obsolete computers. Our convenience-minded society treats these large, expensive appliances like they’re easily disposable. Buying a refrigerator to match the avocado wallpaper seems like a wasteful extravagance. But an iMac (<http://www.apple.com/imac/>)? Sure, why not? Why add RAM to that G3 when you can go buy something cute and colorful? Why fix that old Buick when you can get a Turbo Beetle?

One reason is that it’s not so easy to get rid of last year’s model anymore. Once upon a time, your nephews and nieces would have scrambled to get that old 486 from you. Now they’ve got their own laptops. While schools and charities will often take old computers, not all computers and peripherals are donation-worthy. Shelters, churches, and other charities will often take computers that work, but what should you do with ones that don’t?

Many companies and organizations are springing up around the Web and

National Directory of Computer Recycling Centers (Continued)

The Computers for Schools Association is a nonprofit organization founded in September 1991 by John, Carolyn, and Diana Detwiler. Now completing its tenth year, the Computers for Schools Program is active nationwide and, in some states, is the largest source of computer equipment for K–12 schools.

- Computers for Schools Program
3642 N. Springfield Street
Chicago, IL 60618
Phone: 800-939-6000
Fax: 773-583-7585
Web site: <http://www.computersforschools.com>
Email: pcsforschools@aol.com

The East-West Education Development Foundation accepts computer donations from companies and individual donors and provides a receipt for these tax-deductible contributions. Usable equipment is remanufactured into technology that will ultimately reach a nonprofit organization or a school. Unusable equipment is recycled in accordance with EPA guidelines.

- The East-West Education Development Foundation
504 Dudley Street
Roxbury, MA 02119
Phone: 617-442-7448
Fax: 617-442-7228
Web site: <http://www.eastwest.org>
Email: efw@eastwest.org

around the world to deal with the dead-PC-burial issue. So whether you’ve got an Apple IIe or a Pentium II PC, there are many options available to reduce, reuse, and recycle your old computer. Here are just a few ways to eliminate your computer clutter and reduce the volume in the landfills.

Put It on the Market

While it's probably not a hot commodity on eBay, you might be surprised at what your little Amiga might be worth to collectors. You can try selling used computer equipment through online classifieds. Yahoo has computer classifieds (<http://classifieds.yahoo.com/>) organized by major metropolitan areas, and many other collections of used-computer classifieds are available on the Web. Back Thru the Future Microcomputers Inc. (<http://www.thegreenpc.com/>) is a state and federal EPA-approved "large volume computer recycling depot."

Give It Away

If your computer is still functioning, there's a chance you can donate it to a local school, a neighborhood kid, or one of many charities that accept computers in variable states of repair (a few are listed at the end of this article). Goodwill Industries is using donated PCs to teach inner-city kids how to fix computers. Most Goodwill centers accept functioning electronics with all parts included. To find a do-

nation center near you, contact Goodwill Industries (<http://www.goodwill.org>).

The National Safety Council provides a list of organizations that recycle or refurbish old desktop computers, grouped by state (<http://www.nsc.org/ehc/epr2/>

recycler.htm). A National Safety Council guide to recycling, donating, or reusing your PC (<http://www.nsc.org/ehc/epr2/DONATE.htm>) links to three other lists of involved organizations. A directory of national resources is also included below. More organiza-

National Directory of Computer Recycling Centers (Continued)

The Floppies for Kiddies Recycled Diskette Project collects used and promotional diskettes for redistribution to schools and nonprofit organizations across the country. You can donate one, ten or hundreds of disks. There is no minimum or maximum number that it will accept.

- USA CityLink Project
Attn: Floppies for Kiddies
20349 Highway 36
Covington, LA 70433
Phone: 504-898-2158
Fax: 504-892-8535
Web site: <http://www.usacitylink.com/disks/>
Email: citylink@neosoft.com

Gifts In Kind International, the leading charity in the field of product philanthropy, encourages and manages product donation from companies to nonprofits addressing critical needs, including housing, health care, education, and youth development.

- Gifts In Kind International
333 North Fairfax Street, Suite 100
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone: 703-836-2121
Fax: 703-549-1481
Web site: <http://www.giftsinkind.org>
Email: productdonations@giftsinkind.org

tions can be found through the PEP National Directory of Computer Recycling Programs (http://www.microweb.com/pepsite/Recycle/recycle_index.html).

Think First

The bottom line is that if you really must replace your system, think before you act. Tossing your old system into the garbage may be the easiest way to get rid of it, but remember that doing so could have a lasting impact on the environment. Selling, donating, or at least recycling your old computer equipment is the smart way to go, and it may even make you feel better about splurging on that new system.

National Directory of Computer Recycling Centers (Continued)

The National Christina Foundation (NCF) provides computer technology and solutions to give people with disabilities, students at risk, and the economically disadvantaged the opportunity, through training, to lead more independent and productive lives. The agency matches companies and individuals interested in donating computers and related equipment with nonprofit organizations and schools that serve people with disabilities in the U S. and abroad. Donors send equipment directly to the beneficiary.

- National Cristina Foundation
500 West Putnam
Greenwich, CT 06830
Phone: 203-863-9100 / 800-274-7846
Fax: 203-863-9230
Web site: <http://www.cristina.org/>
Email: ncf@cristina.org