

# How to Safely Recycle PCs

Save to myBoK

*by Carol Ann Quinsey, RHIA, CHPS*

Securing the privacy of both protected health information and personal information should be a primary concern when personal computers have outlived their usefulness. Recycling or disposing of a computer safely can be a challenge.

It's not enough to simply give an old computer to someone else or toss it in the garbage. Files the previous owner or user thought were deleted may still be available. Honest people will permanently delete personal or proprietary information they find without peeking. But finding protected information may be too great a temptation for some people, and once privacy is compromised it is difficult (if not impossible) to regain.

It is tempting to sell old personal computers or donate them to a charitable organization where they may take on a new life and provide the donor with a small tax break in return. While these are viable options, there are steps that should be taken prior to recycling. This holds true in your place of business and in your home.

## Deleting Information on Computers

The HIPAA security rule requires that covered entities have a plan for media reuse or destruction by April 21, 2005. If equipment is to be updated and the organization's plan for reuse, removal, or destruction of computer equipment has not been modified to prepare for the security rule, now is the time to dust it off (or create it), ensuring that the plan adheres to appropriate local, state, and federal laws for recycling.

If computers are to be reused within the organization, personal and organizational information should be removed or overwritten before the computer is reassigned. Personal information should be sought out and deleted throughout the computer: in Internet-related files such as cache files, cookies, and histories; in e-mail contact lists and within message subfolders; and in recycle and trash folders. All documents and nontransferable software should be removed.<sup>1</sup>

Most large hospitals and healthcare systems have procedures in place for data destruction when recycling old computers. However, smaller facilities and individuals recycling home computers may think it sufficient to simply delete files. When files are deleted, they are hidden from view but still available. It is still possible for hackers to recover deleted files.

There are only two ways to permanently delete data. The first is to overwrite the disk space. Commercial disk-cleaning software that overwrites data so it cannot be recovered is readily available. The second method is to degauss (erase) the disk space.

If there are problems removing files or overwriting the data using disk-cleaning software, contact the manufacturer's technical service department and ask how to best delete personal files. Another alternative is to ask a reputable local computer supplier to overwrite the files.<sup>2</sup> There may be a charge for these services, but it is much safer than letting go of the computer without it. Some organizations actually destroy hard drives in order to protect themselves.

## Tips for Recycling PCs

If computers will not be reused within the organization, consider whether donating them to nonprofit agencies is a reasonable alternative. Computers can be more of a burden than a blessing to schools or other nonprofit agencies if they are out of date. It may require a considerable sum of money to bring them up to current standards, if they can be used at all.<sup>3</sup> Before donating, investigate venues for donating computers for refurbishing, such as Computers for Schools.

If computers are below the Pentium or Mac Power PC-level, it may be preferable to work with a commercial recycler rather than donating them directly. Commercial recyclers break down computers and remove any useful parts for reuse. Although

there may be a charge for this service, it prevents hazardous materials from entering landfills. Some recycling companies will also make repaired or refurbished computers available to nonprofit agencies or schools at little or no cost.

If equipment is donated, include accessories if possible (e.g., mouse, keyboard, printer). Some organizations require complete systems, and others are grateful to get them. If you can make a legal transfer of the operating system with the computer, by all means do so. Proof of licensing agreements help facilitate the legal transfer of the operating system.

It is good practice to ask for a document stating exactly what becomes of donated computers, which may be called a certificate of destruction. Such documentation provides the donor with a solid audit trail of what happened with the computer.

Taking appropriate steps can permit the secure reuse, donation, or disposal of computer hardware. It just takes a little effort to do it securely.

## Notes

1. CompuMentor. "Ten Tips for Donating a Computer." Available online at [www.microsoft.com/Education/TenTips.aspx?pf=true](http://www.microsoft.com/Education/TenTips.aspx?pf=true).
2. Microsoft Corporation. "Retire that Computer More Safely." Available online at [www.microsoft.com/athome/security/update/donatecomputer.msp?pf=true](http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/update/donatecomputer.msp?pf=true).
3. CompuMentor. "Ten Tips for Donating a Computer."

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