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Hardware Tips
Keep your PC's internals and externals in tiptop shape by following the sage advice of Contributing Editor Kirk Steers.

Is There Gold in Your Attic? Cash In Your Old PC
Three ways to get a little more value--or use--out of a system you don't want anymore.

Kirk Steers
From the July 2005 issue of PC World magazine

Old computers are more valuable than they used to be. Not too long ago, buying a new PC meant foisting your old system on an unsuspecting relative or friend. But now, even an early Pentium system may be worth something to someone. If your PC is less than six years old and in reasonable working order, you may be able to squeeze a few more productive hours--or even a few dollars--out of it. Here are your old-tech options.

Trade it in: Before you buy a new PC, see if the vendor offers any trade-in discounts. HP frequently runs special short-term trade-in promotions. As I write this, trading in a "good condition" Dell Dimension 4600 under HP's Ditch Your Dinosaur desktop promotion merits a $187 discount on a new HP5000. Click here to get a quote for your PC.

Give it away: Donating your PC to a charity can improve both your karma and your finances. Dell and HP will help you donate old computers to the nonprofit National Cristina Foundation, which gives them to the disadvantaged.

You can take the fair market value--but not the replacement value--of a donated system as a tax deduction. See IRS Publication 526 for more details on what you can and can't deduct. A bonus: Donate a PC through Dell, and you'll get a coupon for a 10 percent discount on purchases from the Dell Home Systems Software and Peripherals Web site.

What kinds of PCs can be donated? According to Dell, the company will accept any working Pentium-class notebook or desktop with a hard drive, monitor, keyboard, and mouse. Include serial numbers, registration keys, and any other available documentation for all software installed on the system. Nonfunctioning machines may be accepted on a case-by-case basis. Check with other vendors and charities for their minimum PC-donation requirements. For more information, visit the TechSoup site and click *Donate Hardware* under 'Hardware Recycling' in the left pane.

Donate as many software and hardware extras with the PC as possible. If you're an educator, check out Microsoft's Fresh Start for Donated Computers program, which helps schools rejuvenate machines with damaged or missing operating systems.

Before you donate, wipe any personal info from the hard drive. Since powerful data-recovery programs are readily available, simply deleting files or reformatting the hard drive won't do; you need to overwrite your files with a disk-wiping utility such as Jetico's free BCWipe program.

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Disk Watcher

If you aren't paranoid about viruses and spyware, you haven't been paying attention. Antivirus and other security programs are only as good as their last update (see this month's Security Tips for more on this issue). One sign of possible trouble is frequent hard-disk activity. The free DiskMon utility from Sysinternals puts indicators in Windows' system tray that flash whenever your disk reads and writes. Remember: Most of the activity is valid, but a drive in overdrive for an extended period when no programs are active could be trying to tell you something.

Recycle It

If your old PC doesn't qualify for a trade-in or donation, recycle it. Computers, monitors, and peripherals contain lead, mercury, and other nasty chemicals that demand special handling. Throwing your system in the trash is not only a very bad idea, it may also be illegal: California and Massachusetts are among the states that have enacted laws prohibiting the disposal of a CRT monitor in a landfill.

If you're buying a new PC or printer, see if the manufacturer offers free recycling; Dell currently includes a coupon for free recycling with each PC or printer. Click here for details.

Dell, HP, and IBM will recycle computer products from any manufacturer for a fee ranging from $10 to $34 (see the chart below). For information on free and low-cost recycling alternatives, check the Web sites of the Electronic Industries Alliance and the National Recycling Coalition.

Computer Recycling Fees

Here are the rates three vendor charge for equipment disposal. You provide the box and packing material; they pay for shipping.

Equipment	Dell[1]	HP	IBM[2]
PC (without monitor)	$10	$31	$30
Monitor (LCD or CRT)	$10	$29	$30
Laser printer	$10	$34	$30
Inkjet printer	$10	$17	$30
PDA	$10	$13	$30

Footnotes: [1]$10 per airway bill (one bill covers one box).
[2]$30 per box (maximum 26 by 26 by 26 inches, 69 pounds).

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