

SPAM, VIRUSES AND NOW E-TOXICITY

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Can we survive the computer age? E-mailboxes filling with obnoxious spam, computer viruses lurking in the shadows of the Internet, and concerns over data security have captured the attention of businesses and their advisors. And judging from recent newspaper and magazine stories, the next computer crisis will come when it's time to throw out obsolete machines—what will we do with our electronic trash?

The Feb. 2, 2004 issue of *Computerworld* included some sobering statistics. Last year, some 63 million personal computers (PCs) were junked in the United States alone. EPA estimates that by the end of 2004, some 315 million PCs will have been disposed in U.S. landfills. Some 24 states either have legislation addressing the electronic waste problem or are considering such legislation.

Why all the interest? Older computers can contain hazardous substances such as lead (solder, monitor glass), chromium, cadmium, and beryllium. Investigations of PC “recycling” facilities in China revealed unsafe practices. In the U.S. several Superfund sites have included allegations of burning insulation from copper wires to facilitate recycling. No business – least of all an environmental law firm – wants to hear that their old computers have been dumped in a field illegally.

Fortunately, there are alternatives.

If a PC is not too old, it can be donated to a charitable organization that provides PCs to those who cannot afford them and to other worthwhile organizations. Those who donate computers are advised to take steps to “shred” electronic files on the hard drive, and to include a copy of an operating system so that the PC is less likely to be discarded.

A business buying new computers can take steps as part of the procurement to address the question of what to do with the old PCs. Purchase contracts can provide that the seller of the new equipment will be responsible for disposing of the old. Leased equipment remains the property of the leasing company, which would be responsible for disposal of the equipment at the end of the lease.

Experts advise that the time to dispose of old computer equipment is when the equipment is taken out of service. Storage space is expensive, and despite the best of intentions, it is unlikely that you will ever again use the “perfectly good” 15-inch CRT monitors you are replacing.

A number of vendors will recycle your old PCs for a fee, typically \$25 or \$30. And a growing number of municipal governments are including electrical waste in separate special waste collection programs. Finally, PC manufacturers such as Dell and HP are beginning to offer disposition services to handle obsolete equipment.

The problem may be overstated, as some note that a typical PC contains only small amounts of hazardous substances, and the trend is toward PCs that contain even less toxicity and are more recycling-friendly. But there is no denying that the subject of what to do with old PCs is a hot one at the moment, and environmental practitioners and their clients would be well advised to exercise due care in disposing of old computer equipment.



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