

## **Technology Spring Cleaning**

### **Disposing of your old technology**

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One of the many hidden challenges technology coordinators are faced with these days is the proper disposal of outdated and unusable technology equipment. And as you are disposing of items that eight years earlier cost the equivalent of this month's paycheck, you may be asking yourself how you can stretch the life of computers even longer. Even if you have a teacher who is craving 20 more old Macintosh SE computers to complete his class set, the technology coordinator will continue to have outdated items and broken technology that needs to lose its role as a paperweight and find its way to a recycling or disposal site. Here we will investigate the options for ridding a school or district of their unwanted technology and take a look at ways to increase the life of your installed technology.

#### **When is too old really *too old*?**

You have heard the saying "One man's trash is another man's gold." Well, this stands true for technology, especially in the K-12 education community. Recently I had a teacher offer to drive 300 miles to pick up a pallet of dust-collecting Macintosh SE computers in order to bring them back to his district to use in a science lab. And how many times have you had to turn away a donation of ailing 386 computers from a well-intentioned parent or local business? "They make a great word processor" is the common justification for offering such out dated equipment to schools. The bottom line is that a computer is too old when nobody at your site can use it efficiently. Does the machine crash so often that people won't use it? Are upgrades not an option because either the computer can take only a total of 8MB of RAM, or the cost of an upgrade would be equal to or greater than the cost of a newer machine of ten times the power? Does none of your newly acquired software work on the old machines? If you answer yes to any of these questions, then some of your technology is probably ready for retirement.

There will always be at least one creative person on staff who will come up with twenty ways to use that old technology. However at some point the lack of space and the cost of repairs outweighs the benefit, and the machines are stored in the basement, a closet, under desks, or just about anywhere to keep them out of site and mind. Perhaps attaching probe-ware to old Macintosh computers or a keyboarding lab of thirty-five 386 computers are viable options but at some point you will have newer, yet still dated, computers to take their place. Perhaps this is when the life of those old machines has come to an end.

#### **Recycle, Reuse, and Refuse**

Schools must reuse and re-purpose old technology in whatever way they can, recycle what they can't reuse, and refuse donations of outdated equipment that will only increase the school's burden of disposal. Nobody wants to fill up the landfill with computers and that is one reason why schools are so often confronted with donations of outdated equipment— people don't know what else to do with it. Recycling old computers is a far better option than the trash bin for a variety of reasons. In addition to basic landfill issues, computer monitors and logic boards contain heavy metals and other toxins. Also, your parent community would probably not be pleased if a picture of a stack of dumped computers bearing your school name in bright red letters appeared in the local newspaper with an eye-catching headline stating, "Local Schools Throw Away Much Needed Technology". However finding a place that will recycle computers can be a challenge. Many small computer stores will take old computers and use the parts to repair other computers. However they usually can

take only a few computers at a time due to space limitations. Some organizations will take computers to refurbish and then send back to the classrooms. Our experience with these organizations is that the computers that are too old for us are usually too old for them as well. They often will charge you per machine to help with their cost of disposal. If none of these options are available to you, there are some large industrial firms that will grind up the computer and logic boards (printers too, but not computer monitors), melt the whole mess down and remove the metal for future use. Some of these places will offer you pennies on the pound delivered that may end up covering the cost of gas to transport the pallets of old computers to their location. Don't forget to check with your purchasing department at the District Office because it is quite probable that there is an official process for "surplusing" equipment, and doing this correctly the first time is much easier than trying to retrace your steps after the fact.

Some schools prefer to "permanently loan" or otherwise give their unwanted technology to students and their families. This is a great idea but along with it should come some words of caution. When giving technology to students we must first make sure that it is functioning properly and then deal with the ongoing need for technical assistance. The technicians in our district are spread so thin that the last thing we would want to do is take on additional technical support requirements by supporting our old computers in the homes of our students. Santa Cruz City Schools has a silent auction for all of the "unwanted technology" collected as part of the annual spring cleaning. This program does require additional effort but it offers an opportunity for employees and families to purchase technology at very low prices (most auctioned computer systems sell for about two dollars). It is clearly stated at the auction that all systems are "as is" and that there will be no further technical support for any item.

### **The Bone Yard**

Don't forget about the bone yard! Dismantling computers and saving parts for repairs or even upgrades can be a smart maneuver as long as the parts you are saving will actually be used within the next year or so. Don't worry about saving that old 128K RAM chip because you probably will not find a time in the near future where you will have a demand for such an item. I hear that they do make interesting earrings, however. Saving viable floppy and CD ROM drives along with power supplies, large RAM chips, keyboards, mice, and working color monitors can prove to be a worthy practice. A new or refurbished floppy drive can cost upwards of sixty dollars, so replacing broken parts with your own bone yard can offer large cost savings.

### **Donations**

Beware of the evils along with the gold nuggets of donations. Some businesses upgrade their computer systems every two years or so, and these businesses are your friend! Work with them to make their annual donation as easy as possible. Have a set of minimum specifications for donations to refer to when people are trying to donate dated technology that may pose an added burden on your technical support requirements. Politely explain to the well-intentioned community member that your site already has many 386 computers and that our students deserve the latest technology to further their education. It can be helpful to point them in the direction of an organization that *may* take their donation such as Goodwill, community centers, and day care facilities.

### **Make a Plan**

Be sure to have a donation plan. In Santa Cruz City Schools we require all technology donations to go through the District Office (D.O.). In some cases this may appear to be adding a layer of red tape, but in the long run it covers all the bases. When a donation is brought to a school site, the Site Technology Liaison (leader) assists the person making the donation with filling out a basic form. This form (available at <http://www.sccs.santacruz.k12.ca.us/html/forms.html>) is used to get the vital

information about both the item and the person making the donation and to make sure that it meets the minimum specifications for donations (<http://www.sccs.santacruz.k12.ca.us/html/techres.html>) for our district. Then they forward the donated item to the Education Technology department at the D.O. where it is refurbished by the district technician. To what extent the computer is upgraded depends upon the overall value of the machine and what items are available from the "bone yard." When the site receives the computer it is ready for action; it has only legally licensed software and operating system on it, along with a web browser, desktop security and an Ethernet card, all pre-configured for the school network. Meanwhile back at the D.O. we have also sent a thank-you letter to the person making the donation that they can use for tax purposes and have done the necessary paperwork to bring the donation before the School Board.

An annual technology spring cleaning can help to remove or re-purpose the unused technology from school sites. With the help of recycling centers, silent auctions, distributions to students, and other environmentally sensitive disposal techniques, you can relieve your site(s) of dust collecting door stops and make room for the new purchases. In my next column, I will address ways to make your new purchases last as long as possible and planning for technology obsolescence.