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Home Experts ICT Hardware What Happens To Old Computers When They Die?

What happens to old computers when they die?

By Paul Hodge on 23 August 2011, 10:52am

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Have you ever wondered what happens to the thousands of old computers that we get rid of everyday?

These days you can't just throw IT equipment out and leave it for the dustmen. The WEEE Directive (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment), which was made law in 2007, means all of us have to dispose of our old computers carefully and safely.

This is because all computers are full of toxic materials. Circuit boards contain heavy metals including mercury, while monitors contain up to 4kgs of hazardous lead. We can safely sit just inches from these hazardous chemicals when they are locked away in our computer, but if they are poorly disposed of they can harm the environment.

How computers are recycled

Your old computer starts its journey on board a vehicle belonging to a licensed waste company as it is transported to an Environmental Agency approved recycling facility. Once at the recycling facility your computer will be broken down into its various components, most of which can be recycled, including; the screen (CRT), system unit, keyboard, toner cartridges and wiring.



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The CRT is put through a 'dis-assembly' line. It is stripped of its recyclable plastic casing, PC board, wire, metal components and strap, which are sorted and sold off individually. What is left is the core of the CRT; a whole glass tube, impregnated with lead, and a metal frame. The CRTs are then loaded onto conveyor belts leading to a crusher. Inside the crusher is a rotating hammer mill that shatters the CRT. A magnet then collects the metal pieces from the debris. The metals and crushed glass, now separated, are funnelled out of the crusher and into different containers.

The lead-contaminated glass can be sold to foundries where the leaded glass is used during the smelting of copper. The lead can also be recovered from the glass by lead smelting. It is then combined with other metals to form alloys that can be sold to manufacturers and used in the production of new CRTs, car batteries, lead wheel weights and radiation shielding.

Processors, RAM, circuit boards, hard drives, and fan units have their original components extracted and are then sold or shredded. All circuit boards are crushed and smelted; and the tiny amounts of valuable metals such as tin, gold and palladium collected are sold to smelters for recycling, or directly to PC manufacturers. The insulated wire is shredded to separate the copper from the plastic covering. The copper can be sold off to manufacturers and the plastic recycled. The PVC plastic that covers the wire has to be burned off at just the right temperature to prevent formation of harmful gases.

At the end of the recycling process nearly every piece of your old computer will have been recovered for re-use – right down to the mouse.

Learn more...

Check out Innovate My School's [Waste Management / Recycling](#) directory for recycling companies.



Paul Hodge

Paul is an Innovate My School expert in the field of IT & Electrical Recycling and the WEEE Directive.

Most businesses and institutions know little about the WEEE Directive of 2007 – partly because it was announced publicly on the same day as the smoking ban, which dominated headlines.

Working in this area since 2007 as a consultant and subsequently setting up an Environment Agency

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licensed IT & electrical Recycling Company called Expired IT, I now have a comprehensive knowledge of the Act's sometimes labyrinthine legal restrictions on all organisations in their disposal of redundant electrical and IT equipment. Only licensed Waste Carriers are permitted to transport electrical waste. As such we take the waste to Environment Agency approved recycling facilities and are able to produce all the paperwork organisations are required to keep in order to show their legal disposal of both hazardous and non-hazardous items.

Our customers now comprise over 200 schools, charities and businesses, with diverse requirements and budgets.

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Written by Erica Russell Watson

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Great article, Amanda. I'd like to repost it on my Ask a Tech Teacher homeschool blog

(<http://askatechteacher.com>) if you don't mind. I think my readers will benefit from your thoughts.

Written by Jacqui

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Written by Tim Miles

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