

Donated Computers—Burden or Blessing?

BEFORE YOU ACCEPT THAT DONATION, TRY THESE 10 TIPS.

It's hard to turn down a free computer. But if you're not careful, such a donation can hurt more than help. It can cost hundreds of dollars to bring a computer up to current standards. Computers that turn out to be unusable have to be recycled for a fee, which further stretches your tight budget. Here are rules to follow when acquiring a donated computer:

1. Before you consider accepting a donation, understand what kind of computer you need. A donated computer is useful only if it fits into your computer system or network and can run the programs or applications you need. For office use, it's best to accept nothing older than Pentium 300s. In training labs, however, older computers may be fine.

2. Don't accept non-working equipment, unless you're sure you can repair it, or you want to use it in a training program geared towards fixing computers.

3. If you're unsure if a donated computer will be useful, refer donors to a refurbisher or recycler. Refurbishers usually handle newer equipment that they fix up for re-use. Recyclers accept older equipment, take out useful parts, and break down the rest for materials recovery. If you can't accept a computer equipment donation, provide people with alternatives to dispose of it properly. Find listings at TechSoup, <http://www.techsoup.org/recycle>.

4. Whenever possible, seek donations from a reputable refurbisher. Rather than soliciting or accepting donations directly from individuals or businesses, it is often wise to apply to refurbishers for older equipment. This gives you a better chance of getting good equipment in working order. Share the Technology's online database (<http://www.sharetechnology.org>) matches donors with recipients by locale. Find other listings of refurbishers at <http://www.techsoup.org/recycle>.

5. If you accept a donation, try to get the software that goes with the donated computer. The most important software to have is the operating system. A four-year-old computer runs best with four-year-old software, and it often runs much more slowly on new software. If you can't get software donated, then try:

- CompuMentor's low-cost software, <http://www.compumentor.org/software>
- Gifts In Kind International, <http://www.GiftsInKind.org>
- Consistent Computer Bargains, <http://www.1computerbargains.com>.

6. Ask for the original media (the disks or CD) that came with the PC when it was purchased. These disks contain the drivers necessary to make the computer run properly and manuals needed for fixing the machine.

7. Be sure the operating system is intact. It is required by law to keep the operating system and current license loaded on a donated computer. Making sure these are included will help ensure the legal transfer of your new computer.

8. Remember the accessories. Don't forget about the keyboard, monitor, mouse, printer, modem, and other accessories that you'll need for the donated PC. Ask for any packaged software that donors might be willing to part with. An office suite such as MS Office or Lotus SmartSuite is the most useful software to have.

9. If you accept a donated computer, and your organization is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, you can offer a tax receipt. The IRS doesn't permit nonprofits to provide a valuation of the donated equipment. You can describe the donation and declare that it helps your organization, but you can't assign a dollar value to it. Find sample wording at <http://www.techsoup.org/recycle>.

10. Delete personal information. If the donor didn't do this ahead of time, delete their Internet cookies, e-mail, personal applications, temporary Internet files, and any other information. ■

CompuMentor (www.compumentor.org), a provider of technology assistance to nonprofits, is working with Microsoft Corporation (www.microsoft.com) to help consumers donate or recycle computers to benefit both society and the environment. For a listing of computer refurbishing resources, see TechSoup.org, CompuMentor's national nonprofit technology Web site.