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## Old computers spread some festive cheer

Was there a powerful new PC under your tree this year? Don't dream of just chucking your old model, writes Nick Kettles

Sunday December 28, 2003

[The Observer](#)



Our appetite for more powerful and sophisticated computers and mobile phones shows no sign of abating, and Christmas will have delivered a new wave of gadgets to homes throughout the country. In the UK over 6 million new PCs are purchased every year, resulting in more than 2 million working PCs being discarded to landfill or storage.



And within three years, enough mobile phones will have been discarded in the UK to cover the Great Wall of China. Yet from August 2004, the EU Directive for Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) will make it illegal for computers and mobile phones to be dumped in landfill sites where a host of toxic chemicals can leach out and pollute the environment. Consumers will be left with the task of responsibly disposing of their computers and mobile phones themselves.

If your phone or PC is relatively new, you could realise upwards of 50 per cent of its retail price on the secondhand market. But a cursory glance at outlets such as eBay and Loot, which have sections dedicated to PCs and electronic consumables, shows the market is nearing saturation. The WEEE directive should significantly increase supply and squeeze resellers' margins still further. A more creative way of disposing of your electronic equipment may be to donate it to one of the many organisations devoted to recycling and reusing PCs and mobile phones for good causes.

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The Community Recycling Network (CRN) is a national umbrella

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organisation for more than 300 community groups, co-operatives and not-for-profit businesses who have turned recycled electronic goods into an industry.

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Andy Nelnes, CRN's information officer, says it is important to understand the difference between recycling and reuse. 'We define recycling as paper, glass, metals etc that can be reprocessed into its constituent parts. But reuse is the best way of dealing with discarded computers and mobile phones.'

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Indeed, experts doubt whether there is enough recycling capacity to deal with the volume of discarded PCs in coming years.

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Among the many organisations dedicated to redistributing discarded PCs for reuse, Computer Aid International is by far the largest. Since 1998, it has played an important part in helping bridge the global digital divide by providing the information technology required to establish an education infrastructure in the developing world. Nearly 25,000 fully refurbished Pentium PCs have been supplied to more than 16,000 educational institutions and 1,150 community groups in 80 developing countries.

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Tony Roberts, chief executive of Computer Aid International, says: 'Donating your PC can help ensure millions of schoolchildren in the poorest countries get access to this increasingly fundamental technology.'

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And Alyson Warhurst, chair of strategy and international development at Warwick Business School, claims we haven't even scratched the surface of demand for used equipment in the developing world. 'Ninety nine per cent of children [there], still leave school without ever having touched a computer in the classroom,' she says.

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There are also many organisations committed to redistributing PCs to groups and individuals in the UK. For example, Computers for the Disabled supplies PCs to the disabled and housebound including centres, clubs, schools and other organisations that serve the disabled. Computers in the Community (CITC) redistributes surplus computers and related equipment from businesses and local authorities across Wales, for reuse by groups and organisations in the Welsh community.

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The reuse of mobile phones is also playing a part in developing countries, particularly in Africa and Eastern Europe, where telephony capabilities are still basic. To be sure your 'recycled' phone is not simply being sold on for profit, make sure you donate it to an established collection scheme which clearly states its policy on how phones are recycled or reused.



For example, Fonebak is a free nationwide recycling scheme that allows owners to drop off their handset at more than 1200 UK shops, including O2, Orange, T-Mobile and Vodafone. About half the 100,000 phones collected each week are refurbished and resold and the other half - beyond repair or too old - are recycled by specialist recyclers who minimise the environmental impact of metals and chemicals in each handset.

Some of the proceeds from the sale of refurbished phones to developing markets will be returned to the network operator, who then donates a percentage to its partner charity. For example Vodafone recently raised £50,000 for Fauna and Flora International environmental projects. An associated scheme, Fonebak Community, run by The Link, helps support more than 300 local community groups by hosting specialist collection boxes in its 280 shops.

Some charities run their own collection schemes. For example Oxfam gets £5 for each working handset donated. A Nokia 3310 enables them to provide a mosquito net to protect a child from malaria.

The WEEE directive also includes as electrical waste computer consumables such as ink cartridges, although so far the Department of Trade and Industry has not implemented this. Nevertheless, consumers can still make sure the 40 million ink cartridges (jet and laser) thrown away each year in the UK are also reused.

The UK Remanufacturers Association says that while giving cartridges back to the original manufacturer means they may be recycled, they almost certainly won't be reused. Instead, consumers can donate the cartridges to a major charity such as Action Aid, Tommy's, Oxfam or NSPCC: these have their own cartridge collection schemes, which go towards reuse programmes.

Alternatively, UKCRA will identify a local remanufacturer, which may be able to purchase your old cartridges for a local cause. Some recent models have significant value. Canon E30 copier cartridges, for example, can fetch up to £10 each.

### **Dont take it to the tip - send it on a trip to Africa**

Until March 2002 St Theresa's High School in Manzini, Swaziland, had only two computers, leaving students such as 16-year-old Tracey Jele, who hopes to study medicine and psychology when she leaves school, at a distinct disadvantage. Only 3 per cent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa receive any higher education. However, thanks to collaboration between Computer Aid International, the Computer Education Trust in Swaziland, the British High Commission and private sponsors she now has access to computers in a brand new school computer lab.



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