

Recycle, if you must

The Greenest choice is to keep using your computer, but if you have to upgrade, here are some environmental options for getting rid of the old one

BY MICHELLE LALONDE, THE GAZETTE JULY 27, 2009

A much-awaited spring-cleaning frenzy finally hit me, in mid-summer, a couple of weeks ago. I suddenly and desperately wanted - needed! - to get rid of two very old computers that had been gathering dust in the hallway for well over a year, and under desks for years before that.

I figured the most environmentally responsible way to get rid of them would surely be to drop them off at my friendly neighbourhood Écocentre. After all, the city created these yards specifically to ensure that consumer items are reused if they can be, and recycled if not. Surely, they would find a good home for my pretty blue iMac, if not my husband's ancient IBM PC, right? Wrong.

I knew I shouldn't just leave computers out on the curb for the garbage collectors, because of the following scary statistic. More than 140,000 tonnes of electronic waste, including computers, televisions, and stereos go to the dump each year in this country. Not only does this stuff take up a lot of scarce space at landfill sites, computers and other electronic appliances contain dangerous substances, including lead, cadmium and mercury, which can leach into soil and the water table.

So off I went to the Écocentre de La Petite-Patrie. I had to wait about half an hour to get in, but then the friendly folks at the gate directed me to a spot near the exit.

I told the man there I had two functioning computers to drop off. He motioned me toward a pile of forlorn-looking PCs, keyboards and printers near the back of the lot. It was lightly raining, and the pile was not in any way protected from the elements.

"Even if they work?" I asked the man, incredulously.

"Yeah, it doesn't matter. The company that picks them up just takes them apart anyway."

So I took the shopping cart the man was offering, rolled it to my rental car, chucked my perfectly functional computers, keyboards and printers into it, wheeled them over to the pile, and against my better judgment, left them there in the rain.

I vowed to find out why the city is operating this way. I mean, isn't

reuse even more environmentally friendly than recycle?

It turns out all the computers dropped off by Montrealers at the six écocentres across the city are picked up by a local company called Kadisal. This company brings the computers and other electronic waste - 477 tonnes worth so far this year - to a warehouse on Côte des Neiges Rd. Here the machines are dismantled and separated into their component materials.

Plastics are shredded into granules, while metals and glass are separated out so they can be sold (assuming there is a market for these materials). Wiring, batteries, cathode ray tubes, and other components that contain harmful pollutants or valuable metals are given or sold to companies that specialize in recuperating or properly disposing of these materials.

I spoke to one of Kadisal's co-owners, Nourredine Kadi. He makes no apologies for the fact that his company takes apart functional (and non-functional) used computers and recycles the materials.

"If we refurbish the computers and then sell or give them away, we lose control of them, and we have no way of knowing where they end up," Kadi explained. "Some people disagree with that (policy), but we believe it is the only way we can truly say that we dispose of computers in a 100 per cent environmentally friendly way."

Kadi says it is important to ensure computers are disposed of properly, in light of recent news reports that have highlighted horrific health risks to millions of workers in India and China, particularly women and children, who are exposed to lead, cadmium and other dangerous materials as they strip computer parts, by burning them or dousing them in acid, to salvage copper, gold or silver.

Kadi notes his company used to provide working computers to a company called ReBoot Montreal, which sent computers to developing countries. Kadi said ReBoot provided proof that the computers were properly disposed of afterward. That company has closed down, Kadi says, and he has not found a similar company that sends computers abroad and can offer such assurances. Another local company, PC Recycle in Ville St. Laurent, does the same thing as Kadisal, but for commercial, municipal and individual clients in the island's west end, as well as some of Montreal's Éco-quartiers.

While PC Recycle dismantles most of the computers it collects, it does run a humanitarian project in El Salvador, where it provides used computers to eight schools.

Jason Mailley has recently returned to Montreal after four years with PC Recycle's project in El Salvador, and he is concerned those horror stories from India and China will hurt legitimate computer recuperation projects like his.

"To go to university, a child in El Salvador has to pass a computer literacy test. The government passed a law saying that schools must teach computer science, but did not provide the means for these schools to buy computers. So 90 per cent of schools there have no computers."

Mailley admits he cannot be sure the computers will be disposed of properly after the schools use them. But he said dismantling millions of perfectly good computers in the west is not the solution.

"My message is that recycling pollutes, too, so it is not necessarily (the best) solution. My project gives a second life to a computer, so it can be used for as long as 16 years," he said, adding his project teaches environmental awareness, and by the time the schools are through with the computers, perhaps a proper disposal program could be in place.

Micro-Recyc-Cooperation, on Park Ave. near Jean Talon St. in Montreal, is another choice if you want your computer to be reused. This organization sends high quality computers to developing countries and will give you a tax receipt for donated electronics once they evaluate your donation.

(They don't accept just anything though. For example, they take only Pentium III and up and Macintosh G4 or higher).

While dropping off your computer at an Écocentre or Éco-quartier is free, dropping it off at PC Recycle or Micro-Recyc-Cooperation will cost you a small fee - \$5 or \$10.

Mailley says the greenest thing you can do with your old computer is to keep using it.

"First you should ask yourself: 'Do I really need the new model or can this last me another year?' " he said. This would qualify as reducing consumption, which is the first and most important of the three Rs (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle). If you really need a new computer, give your old one to a family member, friend or nearby school or organization, so they won't have to buy a new one. If that is not possible, he suggests giving your computer to a reputed organization that will send it to a place where it can be reused.

For more information on PC Recycle go to their website at [www. pc recycle.ca](http://www.pc-recycle.ca) or phone 514-333-7221.

For more on Micro-Recyc-Cooperation, go to www.microrecyccoop.org/anglais/accueil_en.php or phone 514-227-5776.

To locate your nearest Écocentre, search "ecocentres montreal" and click on "coordonnées des écocentres" or dial 311 and follow instructions.

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