



INFORMATION FOR CLIENTS OF TEXAS ATTORNEYS

The information included on this page is for educational and informational purposes only. Please consult an attorney regarding specific legal questions.

Computer Disposal

Computers often hold personal and financial information, including passwords, account numbers, license keys or registration numbers for software programs, addresses and phone numbers, medical and prescription information, tax returns, and other personal documents. If you're getting rid of your old computer, there are things to do before you log off for the last time so your hard drive doesn't become a 21st century treasure chest for identity thieves and information pirates.

You can deter identity theft and information piracy by taking a few preventive steps. A computer's hard drive stores data and maintains an index of files. When you save a file, especially a large one, it is scattered around the hard drive in bits and pieces. Files also are automatically created by browsers and operating systems. When you open a file, the hard drive checks the index, then gathers the bits and pieces and reconstructs them.

When you delete a file, the links between the index and the file disappear, signaling to your system that the file isn't needed any longer and that hard drive space can be overwritten. But the bits and pieces of the deleted file stay on your computer until they're overwritten, and they can be retrieved with a data recovery program. Deleting a file doesn't really remove it. Emptying your computer's recycle bin, deleting your Internet browser's cache, deleting your emails and documents, reformatting your hard drive, or even repartitioning your hard drive are all inadequate to erase the data on your computer. Furthermore, many software licensing agreements require that particular programs be removed from a computer before it leaves the original purchaser's ownership. To remove



data from your hard drive permanently, it needs to be wiped clean.

Before you clean your hard drive, save the files that are important to you on an external storage device — for example, a USB drive, a CD-ROM, or an external hard drive — or transfer them to a new computer. Check your owner's manual, the manufacturer's website, or its customer support line for information on how to save data and transfer it to a new computer.

Utility programs to wipe your hard drive are available both online and in stores where computers are sold. They're generally inexpensive. Some are available on the Internet for free. Wipe utility programs vary in their capabilities: some erase the entire disk, while others allow you to select files or folders to erase. They also vary in their effectiveness: Programs that overwrite or wipe the hard drive many times are very effective; those that overwrite or wipe the drive only



once may not prevent information being wiped from being recovered later. If your old computer contains sensitive information that would be valuable to an identity thief, consider using a program that overwrites or wipes the hard drive many times. Or remove the hard drive and physically destroy it.

One more thing to keep in mind: If you use your home or personal computer for business purposes, check with your employer about how to manage information on your computer that is business-related. Businesses and other institutions are often required by law to carry out data security actions before computers, their hard disk drives, floppy disks, and other forms of removable media are sent outside of the organization.

Disposing of Your Computer

Once you have a “clean” computer, you’ll have several options to dispose of your computer, but be sure to keep the environment in mind. Most computer equipment contains hazardous materials that don’t belong in a landfill. For example, many computers have heavy metals that can contaminate the earth. The U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends that you check with your local health and sanitation agencies for ways to dispose of electronics safely.

Below are some options for disposing of your computer:

Recycle it. Many computer manufacturers — including Apple, Dell, Gateway, and IBM/Lenovo — have programs to recycle computers and components. Check their websites or call their toll-free numbers for more information. The EPA has information on electronic product recycling programs at www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/recycle/ecycling/donate.htm. Your community may have a recycling program. Check with your county or local government, including the local landfill office, for regulations.

Donate it. Many organizations collect old computers and donate them to charities. If your computer is less than five years old and in working condition, chances are someone else can use it. If, however, it is older than five years, or broken, you should recycle it instead.

If you have not yet cleaned your computer of personal data, ask the organization if they have a process to cleanse data from computers. Many of these organi-

zations use reputable disk cleaning software following U.S. Department of Defense guidelines. This software systematically overwrites all data and then verifies that this was done. Make sure that you have a good understanding of how the organization will be addressing your concerns about data security if you will not be addressing this issue yourself. You may even want to go so far as to ask the organization for a written statement indicating the specific method the company will use to cleanse the data from your computer.

Resell it. Some people and organizations buy old computers. Check online. ✪



The information in this article was adapted from “Computer Disposal,” a consumer publication of the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and “Do the ‘PC’ Thing: Donate Computers,” a factsheet of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). To obtain a free copy of “Computer Disposal” and other FTC online and computer security publications, visit onguardonline.gov; call (877)382-4357; or write to Consumer Response Center, Federal Trade Commission, 600 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., H-130, Washington, D.C. 20580. For a free copy of “Do the ‘PC’ Thing” and other EPA factsheets, log onto www.epa.gov/plugin; call (800)490-9198; or write to U.S. EPA/NSCEP, P.O. Box 42419, Cincinnati, Ohio 45242-0419.

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