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SUNDAY

MAY 26, 1996

San Jose Mercury News

Computer users can do their part in recycling

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Los Angeles Times

PEOPLE all over the world celebrated Earth Day last month, but protecting the environment isn't just a once-a-year event. It's the way you live your life.

Computers have been touted by some as the ultimate resource savers. They use relatively little electricity, they display information without the need for paper and, unlike cars and major appliances, they are not made in big, old factories with billowing smokestacks.

Or are they?

Although PCs do help save resources, they also consume them, and they do have an effect on the environment.

Tracking toxins

It starts with the manufacturing process, which "includes a lot of toxic substances, including gases," according to Leslie Byser, program director of Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition (<http://www.svtc.org/svtc/>). Clearly, there needs to be a concerted effort to monitor the manufacturing process to be sure that those toxins don't affect workers or leak into the atmosphere or ground water.

But there is something you can do when it's time to upgrade your PC or any of its components: recycle. Many of us wouldn't dream of tossing a soda can into the trash, but we think nothing of throwing away old PCs, monitors or circuit boards. See if someone else can use the equipment. Giving it to a school or nonprofit organization could get you a tax write-off. The East West Development Foundation (617-261-6699) refurbishes old equipment, which it sends to service organizations in this country and overseas.

Conserve energy

True, computers don't use as much electricity as some appliances, but they do use a significant amount. They account for 5 percent of commercial energy consumption, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. If you are in the market for a new computer, monitor or printer, be sure it bears the EPA's Energy Star logo.

Energy Star-compliant equipment must meet specific EPA power consumption guidelines. In most cases, they go into a "sleep" mode after several minutes of nonuse. Press a key or click the mouse and they go back to full power.

You can find Energy Star-compliant equipment through the EPA's World Wide Web site (<http://www.epa.gov/docs/GCDOAR/EnergyStar.html>), or call (202) 775-6650.

Switch it off

If your PC isn't Energy Star-compliant, don't go out and buy a new one just to save energy. Manufacturing a new machine is more of a resource drain than the extra power the old one consumes. Instead, practice conservation by turning off the PC, monitor or printer if you don't plan to use it for an hour or more.

Whatever you do, don't leave your PC on 24 hours a day. Some people will tell you that you should never turn off your computer. The conventional wisdom used to be that a computer would last longer if you left it on all the time, but that

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Recycling didn't stop with the computer age

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reasoning was based on the idea that the internal components of the computer, and especially the hard disk, could be worn out by repeated starts and stops.

These days, however, the life of your hard disk, the part most prone to failure, isn't likely to be diminished by being turned off and on. Most hard disks are rated to last an average of 10,000 starts and stops, which means that you could expect to turn the computer off and on once a day for 27 years before you would wear it out.

Screen-saver programs, which put images on your screen while you're away from the PC, can be fun, but they don't save energy. A better solution would be to turn off the monitor or, if it's so equipped, take advantage of the machine's ability to go into a sleep mode when not in use. A Windows 95 user can click on the Display icon in the control panel to control the energy-saving features of the monitor. Maximiser (\$35) from Panamax (800-472-5555) is one of several hardware products that power down the monitor 15 minutes after the last key stroke.

Any Hewlett-Packard laser printer with a 4 or 5 in its model number is Energy Star-compliant. But older models are energy hogs, even when they're turned on but

not printing anything. The same is true with most other older laser printers. It's best to leave them off until you're ready to print.

Lasermiser from Bayview Technology (800-770-8539) will turn off your laser printer if it hasn't been used in awhile.

Used laser printer cartridges account for another form of pollution, but they can be recycled or even refilled with fresh toner. Having your spent cartridges refilled is cheaper than buying new ones, and the quality is just as good.

Inkjet printers use very little energy in standby mode, and some models rival laser printers in speed and quality and offer color printing. There are kits available to refill inkjet cartridg-

es, but the ones I've tested are hard to use without making a mess.

As for saving paper, the one-time dream of the paperless office has become an industry joke. The PC and the laser printer have been the best thing to happen to the paper industry. Rather than conserve paper, PCs are being used to churn out an ever-increasing number of documents.

There are things we can do in this regard too. First, we can use paper made from recycled materials and recycle the paper we use. The quality of recycled paper is quite good. Don't think, by the way, that you need special "laser" or "inkjet" paper. I use the same cheap recycled copy paper in my laser printer, color inkjet

printer and copier, and the quality is adequate for most jobs. I keep a small supply of high-quality paper on hand to use when needed.

Second, try to avoid printing out material. If you need to archive e-mail or data collected on the Internet, do so on your hard or floppy-disk drive. If you must print, use both sides of the paper and the smallest type size possible. Also, use narrow margins to squeeze more type onto a page. Most programs have a printer setup option that lets you adjust the top, bottom, left and right margins.

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