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Precautions can protect computers

Data left on old hard drives can fall into identity thieves' hands

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Thinking of donating, selling or trashing your old hard drive? Instead of ending up in landfills, used drives can be recycled or find a new home with someone who never has had a computer before.



John Leamy's company, Data Shark, doesn't bother with erasing hard drives. For \$12.50 the Data Shark physically destroys used drives, making them useless for identity thieves.

JONATHAN HOUSE / PAMPLIN MEDIA GROUP

No matter what you do with your old hard drive, data security is a real concern. In 2003, a pair of [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) graduate students bought 158 used drives to study how much

onal data is inadvertently left on old computer drives.

They found thousands of credit card numbers, medical records, old e-mails, personal and corporate financial records, and pornography. The MIT study found that only 12 drives had been properly wiped clean of sensitive data.

Dave Haskins, production coordinator for [Free Geek](#) in Southeast Portland, says you don't really know who's going to get your computer, especially if you're donating it or selling it on [Craigslist](#) or [eBay](#).

Many people believe that deleting a file removes it permanently from the

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computer. That's not the case.



"When you delete a file, it just removes the reference for that file from the operating system," Haskins says. "The file is still there."



Even reformatting a drive can leave old data accessible. Any confidential information that has been stored on your computer – from bank accounts to your address book – can still be pulled off your hard drive.




"There are a lot of people who go to garage sales looking for used computers so they can mine data like this," says John Leamy, president of [Data Shark](#) in Troutdale.



With the right software, anyone can go into that hard drive and gain access to your old data. By not taking proper precautions, Leamy says, "You've just opened the door for them to take your identity."




Overwriting fixes problem

Haskins acknowledges that concern over data security may prevent people from donating their computer equipment to organizations like Free Geek.



"That old computer very often is still perfectly functioning," Haskins says. "If you throw it out, you're basically disposing of a great piece of useful equipment."




Free Geek receives 1,200 to 1,400 donated computers and drives each month. Many of the donors don't erase their data beforehand, but that might be because they know and trust the organization's security procedures.



Larger companies, like [Dell](#) and [Staples](#), have launched their own recycling programs to keep used computers out of landfills. Data security always is a priority, but not every recycling program has the same policy, so it's important to read the fine print.



Staples' recycling partner, [Amandi Services](#), uses a three-time overwrite process on recycled hard drives.




The Department of Defense recommends seven passes of overwriting a drive with random data to wipe it beyond the point of being able to recover files.



Free Geek overwrites donated drives eight times. Bob MacDonald, Staples vice president of technology services, says data on hard drives recycled through Staples is destroyed "beyond forensic recovery," but still recommends taking steps to protect yourself.

"It's always a good idea to erase the data on your drives before turning them in for recycling," he says.

Wiping a hard drive may not be as complicated as you think. Plan on a couple of hours to do it right. "You need an application that can read and write to every sector of the hard drive, multiple times," Free Geek's Haskins says. He recommends using a program like [Darik's Boot and Nuke](#) to erase data before donating or selling a hard drive.

He says some used computer stores and nonprofits sell computers "as is," without first wiping any resident data from hard drives.

"If they don't have a written policy on data security, I would not give them my hard drive," Haskins says.

Get violent with it

If you don't want to go to the trouble of wiping your hard drive, another option is physical destruction. "The ultimate security is destroying the hard drive," Data Shark's Leamy says.

Leamy recommends removing – and destroying – the hard drive from a computer before it's sold or donated. Data Shark charges \$12.50 to physically destroy a single hard drive and lets the client witness the destruction.

Leamy says you can then put a new hard drive in the old computer for \$50 to \$100.

“That’s cheap considering what you could lose if the wrong person got the information off of your computer,” Leamy says. After the old hard drive has been destroyed, Data Shark makes sure the materials are recycled appropriately, with metals melted down for reuse.

Once you know how to keep your data secure, it’s up to you to decide whether to donate, sell or destroy your old computer drive. Kermit Jensen, a volunteer at Free Geek, used to physically destroy old drives, but now prefers donating them.

Free Geek refurbishes used computers and provides them to those in need, in exchange for volunteer service. Free Geek also sells computer parts and peripherals through its thrift store (1731 S.E. 10th Ave.), and offers classes on how to build your own computer.

As a nonprofit organization, Free Geek imposes a small fee (for monitors and terminals, it’s \$10) or a suggested monetary donation to accompany most computers and peripherals that are donated.

Jensen says he is comfortable enough with their process that he has donated about a dozen drives to Free Geek, without first wiping his data.

“I did nothing,” Jensen says. “I just brought in the drives.”

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