

INTERNET WEEK

Why You Need To Replace Those Windows 98 And NT Machines

By Peter S. Kastner

More than 50 million aging PCs sit on desks in corporate cubes and offices around the world.

They were built and sold before the millennium; in fact, many were bought circa 1998 because of anticipated Y2K problems with even older Microsoft DOS and Windows 3.1 PCs. Small businesses often purchased consumer machines with Windows 98, and larger enterprises installed Windows NT desktops as the "fat clients" of Y2K-generation application enhancements.

Fast forward to mid-2003. Those machines -- dusty monitors surrounded by sticky notes and keyboards that show distinct signs of harboring biological activity -- are still in operation, which is the problem.

If all of those PCs just died with a hard-drive whine and a puff of smoke, the IT and corporate management issue would be simple: Buy a new computer with an up-to-date operating system. However, PCs don't all expire on some arbitrary date, such as the day the computer is completely depreciated. The computers keep running, more or less, the way they have for four or five years -- which is why so many executives have repeatedly used the low-risk "no way" answer to requests for a new generation of business PC replacements.

'Software Never Wears Out'

Non-technical executives believe that as long as the PC hardware keeps running, the PC software will keep running. This is true, but only in a vacuum under laboratory conditions.

The fact is that software does wear out. PC software is programmed and supported by businesses that need to be efficient and profitable, just like their customers. Ford only guarantees spare parts for five years after a car is built. Guess what? Microsoft will only support an operating system for five years after it is introduced.

There are two parts of Microsoft's support policies that the CEO needs to understand clearly. First, Microsoft products that are past their support dates cannot have sup-

port contracts, so telephone remediation ceases, and there are no new service packs to fix bugs. Second, security hot fixes are no longer provided, meaning that newly discovered security bugs in non-supported products won't be fixed by Microsoft and, thus, become an attractive entre for hackers.

The virus W95.Tenrobot is a memory-resident file appender that only infects files when it is executed on a Windows 95/98/Me system. It was discovered last month and is a "latest threat" at Symantec's security web site. W95.Tenrobot gives a hacker remote access to a computer through IRC. This virus shows that old software is still very attractive to the bad guys.

Windows 98 and Windows NT have no facilities to indicate that a machine has been hacked, unlike more recent versions where at least a trail is left behind.

Windows NT 4.xx goes into the non-support stage on June 30 and Windows 98/SE on January 16, 2004. It is logical to assume that support reductions by other hardware and software suppliers will be influenced by those dates.

Act Two: The Auditors Enter

Corporate desktops that are left vulnerable to security problems of unknown risk represent an unacceptable information technology practice. A Big Four accounting firm partner indicated to me that his firm's auditors, as they did during the Year 2000 period, would look askance at clients running mission-critical business processes on unsupported and vulnerable computers.

Followed By The Lawyers

The corporate law partner I spoke with asked to see a copy of this article, saying his firm had a lot of old machines. He said that some circumstances, such as knowing that the use of old PCs might result in an enterprise catastrophe, could lead to a claim of negligence. But his more insightful comment was that no corporate executive wants to become a laughingstock by doing something stupid that harms the business, yet is avoidable.

Looking down the road, I think keeping Win 98-era PCs around much longer will move from the executive's prudent category to the stupid category.

It's A Great Time For A PC Replacement Cycle

If you buy the above arguments and are still reading, then I have good news: Mid-2003 is an auspicious time for starting or accelerating a PC replacement cycle:

- Windows XP Pro Service Pack 1 is out in the field and working well. No stability problems here. A great client OS on today's more powerful desktops -- and laptops.
- Windows Server 2003 brings a new round of support servers, notably Exchange 2003 and SQL Server. These use network and server resources more efficiently.
- Office 2003 will be out in a few months, along with new collaboration options. Definitely worth evaluating.
- Intel's new Springdale chipset will soon inaugurate an 18-month period of platform and software image stability. Features include a fast, 800-MHz front-side bus, better graphics, and more efficient Ethernet processing.
- Intel's Pentium 4 microprocessors with Hyper Threading are now mainstream. They are better at dealing with the multi-tasking that is prevalent in the operating system, as well as thread-aware applications.
- About one-third of corporate PC purchases this year will be laptops. The Intel Centrino wireless laptops feature a long battery life and have the benefits of wireless productivity.

At Aberdeen's PC Deals, managed small-business PC

prices on our reference desktop -- which includes Windows XP Pro and Office XP Pro licenses -- run from \$1,250 to \$1,400 this month from the top suppliers. That works out to roughly \$2 per day over three or four years in capital asset costs. Moreover, a new PC has much lower ongoing management costs than the late-90s generation; total cost of ownership is down appreciably.

Time For Action

Last year at this time my company was filled with those old PCs described above. Management did not at all like spending hard cash in a down economy to upgrade our PC ecosystem. However, we analyzed the business situation and concluded that we could not afford the aggravation and potential disruption to our knowledge worker-driven business by not upgrading. Tough medicine, I concluded, but common sense.

For those businesses that are at the tipping point -- especially the small-to-medium ones lacking a 24-by-7 global IT operations department -- it is time to crank up the planning for the recession-disrupted PC replacement cycle and get with the 21st century.

Tell the C-level executives that your organization may be able to limp through the next year, but at an increasing risk to individual productivity and business-process continuity.

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