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LOOSE WIRE

By JEREMY WAGSTAFF



Green Savers

Tips to trim your computer's consumption

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JAKARTA, Indonesia -- Amid all the recent hoopla about sea levels rising 60 centimeters (so far theoretical) and flood waters lapping around my two Jakarta-based feet (slightly less theoretical), I thought I'd try to find out what I could do to my computer to reduce my carbon footprint.

My first resolution: Don't buy a new computer.

Of course, as a technology columnist with my future intimately linked to your interest in computer-related products I shouldn't really say that, but then again I don't expect anyone to follow my lead. According to Nabil Nasr, director of the National Center for Remanufacturing and Resource Recovery at the Rochester Institute of Technology in the U.S., and something of an expert on Asian manufacturing, the lifespan of a PC has been cut in half since 1992. Now, they're not expected to last more than a couple of years partly because we keep buying new computers to keep up with the latest software.


Let's face it: It's impossible to be technologically cool and environmentally conscientious at the same time. As Britain's Green Party pointed out late last month, Microsoft's newly launched operating system Vista requires so much capacity, most of us will have to upgrade or replace our hardware. "Future archaeologists," the Green Party spokesman said, "will be able to identify a 'Vista Upgrade Layer' when they go through our landfill sites." That's if they're not underwater by then.

I'm hanging on with what I've got as long as I can, though as I've written before, adding a larger hard drive and some extra memory is no bad thing. Mac users swear theirs last much longer, while some users ditch Windows altogether for something like the open source Ubuntu (www.ubuntu.com¹). If you must buy a new computer, look for the Energy Star logo: Even though it's a U.S. government program, the Energy Star standard is widely adopted in the industry. Devices with the logo have power management systems that use up to 70% less electricity than other machines.

And while everyone talks about recycling, first consider reusing. An old computer might work well as a server for your home network or as a place to store and run your MP3 music files. At the very least, they make great doorstops. Or share your old gadgets with others.

Andy Abramson, a telecommunications consultant based in California, passes his old hand-held digital assistants to a chef friend who is uninterested in having the latest gadgets. Old printers go to his fiancée's nephews. He's even got a list. "Having the designated list of people who you know will 'use' the hardware is very important to a green computing program," he says. If you don't have a list of chefs or nephews, Chris Barnes of Minnesota-based online hardware consultancy Geek Squad recommends you check out

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Freecycle, a global donation network that includes sites in most big Asian cities (www.freecycle.org²).

We're used to computers humming around us, day in and day out. There's something reassuring about it, but it's not good. You should be turning as many of them off as you can, by activating any power-saving features they may have. If you find the usual settings a tad fiddly, download a small software program called Local Cooling from www.localcooling.com³; it not only makes configuring the power-management features easier but also tells you (roughly) how many trees and kilowatt hours you're saving. Cute. Oh, and don't use a screen saver thinking you're helping the environment. A computer in sleep mode uses about 5% the energy of one that's running a screen saver, according to Mr. Nasr. Better to set the computer to shut down the hard drive after a few minutes of inactivity. This, says Ben Linder, chief executive of server software developer Scalent Systems in California, "will go unnoticed by users but save 15% power."

Computers pack a bigger punch these days, which means you don't have to leave them on at night to run automatic updates, virus scans or disk checkers. Instead, you can either let them run at lunch, or even while you're working. Lenovo computers, for example, have a mode called whisper, which lets you designate how much of the computer's resources can be devoted to background tasks like defragmenting, or tidying up, hard drives. The newly released 2007 edition of Diskeeper's defragmenting software takes this a step further with a feature called InvisiTasking, which means the software runs, well, invisibly.

Now there's no excuse not to turn your PC off. Actually, with your Windows PC or laptop, there's no need to turn the thing off: Selecting "suspend" ("Start" menu, "Turn off computer," then hold the Shift key down so the "Stand by" button becomes "Hibernate") will reduce power consumption down to less than one watt, according to Lenovo vice president Stephen B. Andrews. (Compare this with the standby power of some electronic appliances, which can be as high as 20 watts.)

Not that anyone is doing this very much, at least not our bosses. A recent survey by Britain's nongovernment National Energy Foundation showed that, among other things, more than a third of workers didn't know if "automatic hibernation" mode was activated on their computer, and nearly 90% of them said their boss had never asked or reminded them to shut down their PC before leaving work. So if you're in an office, or run one, you've got a choice: Go around turning off every computer by hand, or buy software that does it for you. Seminole Community College in Florida, for example, uses software from locally-based Persysent Technologies; it turns off the school's 3,500 computers overnight. This saves the college tens of thousands of dollars a year, reckons Dick Hamman, vice president of the school's information technology.

Me? I don't work in a fancy office, so I have my own secret weapon: power strips that not only have on/off buttons for each plug, but a master switch as well. I then deploy them at table height, either suspended below the desk or on a cabinet where I can get at them easily to turn them off. But of course I'm not perfect. When I go to bed, there are still way too many little lights blinking at me.

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