

Information Technology

Mid-Life Kickers

So those computers that seemed so sleek and powerful two, maybe three –could it be four? – years ago seem pokey now. Is there any way to squeeze an extra year out of them?

This column returns to the topic of the very first column from May, 1998: whether and when it pays to upgrade hardware. Back when I was with a large computer company, we referred to performance and feature improvements during a machine's life as "mid-life kickers", intended to keep it selling until its successor was ready.

Assuming you've tuned software performance, what else can be done? New versions of Windows and application software need more memory (RAM), so that's the first option. While your mileage may vary, in our experience Windows XP runs poorly with 128MB, OK with 256MB and nicely with 512MB. Selecting the right memory is tricky, so for clients we always get memory from the computer manufacturer, Crucial or Kingston.

Short of disk space? That's more complicated. Many older machines cannot support current hard drives without special software or hardware. While most hard drives sold in retail stores include such software and utilities to copy everything to the new drive, snags can occur. Back up the system first and keep the old drive around for a few weeks, just in case.

Still need speed? What about a processor upgrade? Can you slip a shiny new 2.8GHz Pentium-4 in place of that toothless old 450MHz P-III? Nope. P-II to P-III, P-III to P-III and P-4 to P-4 upgrades exist, but they cost more and deliver less than you might expect. Our experience is that for workstations it usually makes more sense to get a new one and redeploy the old one. For servers, both the initial cost and cost of migration are higher than for workstations, so a mid-life processor upgrade can be cost-effective if the machine is designed for additional processors. (Our experience upgrading single-processor servers has been disappointing.)

Of course, the cost of any upgrade has to be balanced against the additional life it provides. So kick back and keep those mid-life kickers kicking!

This column by Denis Williamson of MacLamor Computer Consulting aims to help readers maximize the value of information technology. You can reach Denis at 845-357-1877 or denis@maclamor.com. Past columns are available by e-mailing Denis.