

The When and Why of Upgrading Computers

(This advice in this column from 1998 is still sound.) A friend called. She had replaced several computers in her business, and wanted to take two home for the kids to use for Internet access, homework, games, etc. Could I install a newer version of Windows on them? On examining the machines, I determined that they would need faster processors, more memory and bigger disk drives. Upgrading them would cost \$400-500 each.

When does it make sense to upgrade rather than replace? Each situation is different, but here are some considerations: Have your needs changed significantly? Are you adding a large application or planning a major software or network upgrade? These factors favor replacing rather than upgrading. But if you're adding to an existing application, enlarging a database, trying to avoid disruption and retraining, or just want to squeeze another year out of the existing equipment, upgrading makes sense.

Hardware represents a surprisingly small fraction of the total cost of computer ownership. The Gartner Group found that a PC costs a large company about \$8,000 per year, including training, support, software and the impact of downtime. While manufacturers and software suppliers are working to reduce management and support costs, hardware is becoming ever cheaper. In 1997 we saw PCs for under \$1,000. Later this year (1998), we'll see perfectly adequate desktop PCs for \$500 (without monitor).

Hmm... does it make sense to upgrade a PC when a new one costs \$500?

My advice to the friend: the old machines are adequate for homework and doing research on the Internet. Don't upgrade or install a later version of Windows on them; wait for PC prices to come down.

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