



Computer Replacement & Lifecycle Guide

How to decide whether a computer should be fixed, upgraded, or replaced — and how to stop making that decision one emergency at a time.

FILLABLE PDF

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EDITION

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QUESTIONS?

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Most organizations replace computers the same way: something breaks, somebody cannot work, and a replacement gets bought that afternoon at whatever price is available. It works, in the sense that the person can type again by Thursday. It is also the most expensive way to do it.

This guide gives you a way to look at the computers you already own, decide what to do with each one, and move to replacing a few every year instead of all of them at once. No technical background needed.

How to use this document

Sections 1 to 3 tell you what to measure against. Section 4 helps you decide about one particular computer. Sections 6 to 8 are for when you are ready to plan and buy.

The worksheet near the end is meant to be printed and carried desk to desk. A filled-in copy lists your equipment and its weak points, so keep it somewhere sensible.

1 Three Questions, In This Order

Almost every decision about an old computer comes down to these three. If the answer to the first is no, the other two do not matter.

The question	What you are really asking	If the answer is no
Is it still getting security updates?	Is the version of Windows on it still supported, and does the manufacturer still support the machine itself?	Replace it, or write down that you have accepted the risk. A computer that has stopped receiving security fixes never gets safer, only worse.
Is it reliable?	In the past year, has this machine caused lost work, repeat service calls, near-misses with data, or a workaround somebody has quietly adopted?	Replace it. The staff time is worth more than the machine.
Is it fast enough to do the job?	Can it run the programs this person actually uses without wasting their day?	If it is slow because of the hard drive or memory, upgrade it. If it is slow because of the processor, replace it.

A computer that fails the first question is not worth repairing, however well it runs. A computer that passes all three is worth keeping, even if it is older than your replacement policy says it should be.

2 Where Windows Stands Right Now

Support dates are set by Microsoft and do not move to suit your budget year, which makes them the hardest part of any replacement plan to argue with.

What	When	What it means for you
Windows 10 stopped being supported	October 14, 2025	Already passed. Windows 10 computers stopped receiving security fixes the normal way.
Paid extension, first year (business)	through October 13, 2026	Cheapest year. The price goes up after this.
Paid extension, second year (business)	through October 2027	Costs roughly double the first year, per computer.
Paid extension, third year (business)	through October 2028	The last year. After this, no Windows 10 computer gets security fixes at all.
Paid extension for personal computers	through October 12, 2027	Home machines only. Computers managed by a business are not eligible.
Office programs on Windows 10	through October 10, 2028	Office keeps working longer than Windows does. That is not a reason to keep Windows 10.

What the paid extension actually is, and what it is not

Microsoft sells a temporary extension called Extended Security Updates, or ESU. You pay per computer, per year, and in exchange those computers keep getting security fixes for a while longer.

It buys time. It is not a fix. You get security patches and nothing else. No improvements, no bug fixes, no support if something goes wrong.

Waiting makes it more expensive. The price roughly doubles each year, and an organization that signs up late is generally required to buy the earlier years too before it can get current coverage. Three years of paying for extensions on one machine often comes close to just buying a new one.

Windows 11 has its own support dates as well. Each version of Windows 11 is supported for a couple of years before you need to move to a newer one, which usually happens quietly in the background. A computer running Windows 11 is not automatically current, but it is a much smaller problem than a computer running Windows 10.

■ Will this computer run Windows 11?

The words you will hear, and what they actually mean

TPM 2.0 (Trusted Platform Module)

A small dedicated security chip that stores encryption keys and proves the machine is the machine it claims to be. A tamper-evident safe soldered to the motherboard. Windows 11 requires one.

Secure Boot

A check run before Windows loads, confirming the startup software has not been tampered with. A seal on a medicine bottle: you look at it before you trust what is inside.

Supported processor list

Microsoft publishes which processors Windows 11 will run on. Being fast enough is not the test. Being on the list is the test.

Memory and storage can usually be added to an old machine. These three cannot. As a rough guide, computers bought before about 2018 generally will not qualify, because the supported processor list starts around that generation. There are ways to force Windows 11 onto a machine that does not meet the requirements, and we do not recommend them: Microsoft does not guarantee those machines will keep receiving updates.

3 How Long Equipment Should Last

These are the points at which equipment stops being worth keeping, not the points at which it stops switching on. Almost anything will still power up long after the range below. That is not the same thing.

Equipment	Plan to replace at	Worth knowing
Office desktop computer	4-5 years	Push toward 5 only if the work is light and it already has fast solid state storage.
Laptop	3-4 years	Batteries, hinges, and keyboards wear out on a schedule desktops do not. Carrying it around speeds all three up.
Design or engineering computer	3-4 years	The programs get more demanding faster than ordinary office software does.
Shop floor or checkout computer	5-7 years	Often lasts longer, and is usually the last one anybody updates and the first one everybody forgets.
Server in your building	5-6 years	Replace it when the warranty runs out, not when it fails.
Firewall and network equipment	4-6 years	Replace when the maker stops issuing updates for it, even if it is still working perfectly.
Monitors, docks, keyboards	6-8 years	Keep using these across replacements. You rarely need new ones with a new computer.

4 Fix It, Upgrade It, or Replace It

Find the description that matches the computer, then read across. If two rows apply, follow the more drastic one.

What you are seeing	Usually because	What to do
Slow to start up, slow to open anything, slow all the time	It still has an old mechanical hard drive	Upgrade. Swapping in solid state storage is the best value upgrade there is, and often makes a machine feel new.
Fine on its own, slow once several things are open	Not enough memory	Upgrade, if the machine is still supported and can take more.

What you are seeing	Usually because	What to do
Still slow after new storage and more memory	The processor is the limit	Replace. There is nothing left to upgrade.
Restarts on its own, freezes, blue screens	Failing storage, memory, or power supply, or it is overheating	Get it looked at first. Worth repairing if it is under four years old and still supported. Otherwise replace it.
Battery will not hold a charge	Normal battery wear	Repair if the laptop is under three years old and otherwise fine. Replace it if it is older.
Cracked screen, dead keys, broken hinge	Physical damage	Compare the numbers. If the repair costs more than about half a new machine, replace it.
Cannot be upgraded to Windows 11	It does not meet the requirements, and cannot be made to	Replace it, and put it in next year's budget rather than waiting for it to fail.
Works fine, but nobody is sure what it does	An undocumented machine, usually running one important program	Write down what it does before touching it. These are the machines that cause week-long outages.
The same person keeps needing service calls	Aging hardware, or a fault nobody has got to the bottom of	Replace it. Add up the hours lost, not just the repair invoices.

A rule of thumb that holds up well

If a repair costs more than half the price of a suitable replacement, or the machine is already past the ages in section 3, replacing it is usually the better decision even when repairing it is perfectly possible.

The exception is a computer running an old program that will not work on anything newer. That is a software problem in disguise, and it needs planning of its own rather than another year of hoping.

5 The Costs That Never Appear on the Invoice

People usually compare a repair quote to a purchase price and stop there. That comparison leaves out everything below, which is why keeping old computers so often turns out to be the expensive choice.

- ☐ Time your staff spend waiting for a computer.

Two minutes an hour, across an eight-hour day and a working year, is around 65 hours per person. Whether that is worth more than the machine is a calculation worth doing rather than assuming.

- ☐ Support time spent again and again on the same machines.

- ☐ Buying in an emergency, at retail prices, with no time to set it up properly.

- ☐ A machine failing during your busiest week, at month end, or during an inspection.

- ☐ The risk of running something that no longer gets security fixes, including what your insurer or your contracts have to say about it.
- ☐ Losing work on a machine that failed before anybody checked whether it was being backed up.
- ☐ Paying per computer, per year, to postpone the decision.

6 Buy the Same Thing Twice

Nine identical computers are much cheaper to look after than nine different ones. It means fewer surprises, fewer spare parts, and a failed machine becomes a swap rather than a project.

- ☐ Pick one or two models and keep buying those for as long as you can get them.
Business ranges from the major manufacturers stay available for years for exactly this reason.
- ☐ Buy business models rather than the consumer ones on the shelf at a big-box store. The warranty and the support behind them are different.
- ☐ Once you are past about fifteen people, keep one spare computer set up and ready on a shelf.
It pays for itself the first time it saves a day of downtime.
- ☐ Set every new machine up the same way, not just buy the same hardware.
- ☐ Write down the model, serial number, purchase date, and warranty end date when it arrives, not years later.

7 Replacing a Few Every Year

The goal is to replace a predictable handful of computers annually instead of the whole lot every few years. It turns an unpredictable expense into a steady one, and it means no single year contains every machine you own wearing out at once.

If you replace every	You replace this much each year	With 20 computers, that is
4 years	A quarter of them	5 computers a year
5 years	A fifth of them	4 computers a year
3 years (laptops, or demanding work)	A third of them	7 computers a year

To get started, list every computer by the date you bought it, replace the oldest group first, and do the same again next year. If your equipment is badly bunched up, spread the correction across two budget years rather than trying to fix it all in one.

8 What to Ask For When You Buy

Specifications change every year. The reasoning does not. These are the things that decide whether a computer is still pleasant to use in year four.

- ☐ Solid state storage in every machine, no exceptions.
There is no good reason to buy a new computer with an old-style mechanical drive.
- ☐ Enough memory for how the person actually works.
Count the programs and browser tabs they keep open, not their job title.
- ☐ A recent enough processor that the machine has a full life ahead of it.
Saving a little by buying last year's model shortens the life at the other end.
- ☐ The security chip and startup protection Windows 11 needs, switched on.
- ☐ A warranty that lasts as long as you intend to keep it.
A three-year warranty on a computer you plan to keep five years leaves two years uncovered.
- ☐ Next-business-day or on-site service where somebody genuinely cannot work without the machine.
- ☐ Docks and connections that match the monitors and accessories you already own.

9 Getting Rid of the Old One Safely

The new computer is only half the job. The old one leaves the building with your information still on it. Organizations covered by HIPAA, CJIS, IRS rules, or a contract may have specific requirements about how that information is destroyed and what record you keep.

- ☐ Confirm everything has been moved across and actually opens on the new machine before the old one leaves the desk.
- ☐ Wipe or physically destroy the drive. Deleting the files and reinstalling Windows is not enough.
Ordinary deletion removes the index, not the contents, the way tearing out a table of contents does not remove the chapters. The recognized methods are overwriting, cryptographic erase (destroying the encryption key so the contents become unreadable), and physical destruction. NIST publishes guidance on this if you need to point at something.
- ☐ Keep a record of what was destroyed, when, by whom, and how.
- ☐ Cancel or move any software licenses and subscriptions tied to that machine so you stop paying for it.
- ☐ Take the machine off your equipment list, out of your backups, and out of anything that monitors it.
- ☐ Use a proper electronics recycler rather than putting it in the dumpster.

Donating old computers

Donating retired equipment is a generous thing to do, and it does not change anything above. A machine that leaves your building with readable information on it is a disclosure regardless of who receives it, and regardless of how good the cause is.



10 Your Equipment Worksheet

One line per computer. In the last column write **K** to keep it, **U** to upgrade it, **R** to replace it, or **D** to get rid of it.

Who uses it / where	Model	Bought	Windows	Age	K U R D	When

Summary

Computers looked at

To replace this year

Replacing every (3 / 4 / 5 years)

Running Windows that is no longer supported

Rough budget needed

Completed by and date

About this guide

Support dates, program terms, and prices published by Microsoft and by computer manufacturers change over time. The dates in section 2 reflect what Microsoft had published as of September 2026. Before you commit money, check the current dates on Microsoft's own lifecycle pages, which are linked from the Computer Ties IT Resource Center.

This is general planning guidance, not legal, purchasing, or compliance advice. If your organization has rules about how equipment and information must be disposed of, confirm what those rules require.



Not sure which computers are actually the problem?

Computer Ties can go through your equipment, tell you what is no longer supported and what is close to failing, and give you a replacement plan and a budget figure you can take to whoever approves spending. We also handle the rest of it: moving everything across and setting the new machines up to a consistent build, and we can advise on wiping and retiring the equipment being replaced.

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