

Business IT garbage is a goldmine for charities

BY DAN MCLEAN

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One organization's computing trash is another's information technology treasure.

There is a trove of IT waste that exists among larger organizations -- stockrooms filled with old computing hardware deemed no longer capable of supporting the processes and applications of the business. It's electronic trash that typically ends up being stored or, worse, discarded in a landfill or offshore "recycling" facility. Few would imagine there's any use for such obsolete gear.

But there is.

Consider those for whom IT is a scarce commodity -- charities and non-profit groups. Most don't need the advanced computing power of large enterprises or even some smaller businesses, and they'd love to get their hands on this goldmine of computing garbage.

That's what reBOOT Canada is all about. The non-profit organization provides refurbished computer hardware, training and technical support to charitable organizations. According to reBOOT executive director Devon MacDonald, there's typically no budget for IT among charitable organizations. The reason is simple: Charities direct all of the scarce resources they have to front-line social services.

"I don't think there is a single charitable organization that would rather spend less on IT equipment," he says, explaining that while charitable organizations often can't afford the latest technology, they definitely recognize IT as something that boosts efficiency. Technology ranging from simple e-mail systems and contributor databases right up to customer relationship management systems are ways for these groups to follow up and track donations and donors. IT also helps charitable organizations communicate with various levels of government and keep tabs on clientele.

"It would be difficult to do [these things] without IT," Mr. MacDonald explains. "Society as a whole relies more and more on IT, and when charitable organizations can't keep up [with technology], they aren't participating in society as a whole. Having refurbished or donated equipment helps them jump up and stay involved and stay communicating with people."

Celebrating its 10th anniversary, reBOOT is a major source of IT equipment for charity groups. During its history, reBOOT has reclaimed more than 50,000 PCs from Canadian businesses and individuals, and distributed them to 7,000 Canadian charity and non-profit organizations. But reBOOT still turns down more than one-third of the requests received each year for computing equipment.

"We guess that we've turned away 3,000 organizations because we didn't have the type of equipment they were looking for," Mr. MacDonald says, despite the fact that much of what is needed is sitting in corporate storage rooms or sent to landfills.

The largest shortfall is in notebooks. Since many charitable organizations today don't have office space and are staffed by one or two people, staff typically work from their homes. For them, a desktop is great, but a notebook would be even better.

Alas, Mr. MacDonald says, notebooks are scarce because companies tend to hang on to these longer than traditional desktops. He says there are more than 400 organizations across the country on a waiting list for reBOOT notebooks.

Higher-end desktops --machines able to run Window XP on Pentium 3 or Celeron processors -- are also in great demand. More than 80 per cent of the IT equipment reBOOT repairs and redistributes are stationary or portable desktops. The group manages a relatively high volume of reclamation, thanks to the fact that many IT donors contribute systems that are of a similar make and model.

"We look at each machine to assess the problems it has," he says. "Each may have some working parts, while others need repair or replacement. When you look at a machine, there's always something wrong with it."

Using the parts of one machine to fix another, reBOOT technicians are able to make fully functional about half of the desktop systems received from donors. Some machines may take 30 seconds to repair, while others may take a few days, Mr. MacDonald says. "If we got in 100 [cast-off desktop] machines from an organization, we'd get 50 fully functioning machines from that."

There's value for the businesses donating equipment, too. In addition to providing equipment pickup, reBOOT offers donors services such as certified data removal, and it issues tax receipts for the value of all working equipment.

Working personal computers are resold to charities, typically at a cost of between \$100 and \$200 per system, which Mr. MacDonald says pretty much covers the cost to repair them. A typical machine resold is a Pentium 3 class with "Internet-ready" dialup or network connection capability. Each system comes preloaded with Microsoft Office 2000 and Windows 2000, he says.

Among the organizations for which reBOOT has already provided IT equipment is the Learning Enrichment Foundation -- a resource program agency for new Canadians, providing them with daycare and job training. Another is the Sky's the Limit, a community group that works with inner city children in Toronto's Regent Park, offering mentor programs -- and hundreds of computer systems -- to "at-risk" children and teens.

As time goes on, ever cheaper hardware will probably reduce the need for an organization like reBOOT, and Mr. MacDonald says he's fine with that.

"We don't see that as a bad thing," he says. "We'd see it as accomplishing our goal of getting technology out to people who need it."

In the meantime, many Canadian charitable organizations continue to struggle with dated equipment that is years behind current IT standards and is often incompatible with current technologies in today's workplace, even though businesses regularly decommission and dispose of the gear these groups need. If you can help, contact <http://www.rebootcanada.ca> -- it's a way of approaching the corporate technology upgrade cycle so that charities, business and the environment all win.

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