GPSOLO

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MAC USER: Time to Upgrade?

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How can I improve the performance of my computer? Is it time to upgrade? These questions are standard fare for lawyers and their offices when a new computer or operating system comes out, or when their machines just "feel" slow and cumbersome. It's an important question because it directly implicates how you do your work and how you deal with the expense.

One of my weaknesses is for any and all new Apple technology. However, I enjoy working with and learning new computers, software, and related objects. This is really not something for everyone or even most; if you're in a law office that depends on regularity, being an "early adopter" is not for you. Better to let fools such as I go through the pains of upgrades or newness and report back to the wiser ones. But, having said that, at some point your office hardware or software will simply need an upgrade. So, what do you do?

Probably the first questions to ask are "how long will this take" and "how much will this cost." Depending on the answers, the decision to upgrade or replace might be relatively easy. If you can get a new machine fairly inexpensively and sell yours (after destroying or wiping clean the drive) to cover some of the cost, it might make more sense to go ahead and get a new machine. If the improvement involves basic maintenance steps or "only" the addition of RAM to the machine, you can probably put off the day you'll need a full replacement.

Before I summarize some steps you can take, I first want to encourage you to buy a downloadable book put out by TidBITS Publishing called *Take Control of Maintaining Your Mac.* Authored

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GPSolo is devoted to themes of critical importance to your practice. Each issue contains articles exploring a particular topic of interest to solos, small firms, and general practitioners, as well as articles related to technology and practice management. And to keep you up to date, each issue contains five *Best of ABA Sections* digests, reprinting the top articles published by other ABA entities that will be of the greatest interest to you.

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by Joe Kissell, who has written a plethora of works to help even neophytes get the most from their various electronics, it's a great review and step-by-step discussion of how to maintain your Mac computer. And before you even think of buying new or paying for upgrades to what you have, consider where some basic maintenance might help improve your computer's performance. This title and many others can be viewed and downloaded at Take Control eBooks.

This short article is basically a summary of considerations mentioned in that book, as well as other research, noted along the way.

Now, let me begin by clarifying some assumptions: I'm talking to people who have only one to three or so computers in their office, who don't have a regular staff tech person, and who sometimes deal with tech issues themselves. I'll also assume that you have already invested in some essential things to make your office function properly: hard drives or cloud storage for backing up, a surge protector to protect your systems, and some sort of lock or security system to deter or prevent loss and theft.

Assuming that the above is true, and that you have come to the point of considering upgrades or replacements, your first step will be to conduct proper maintenance to make sure your hardware is functioning as best it can. The following steps, discussed more fully in Kissell's book, should be taken:

1. Back up your computer(s). Anything essential and mission-critical should be backed up two or three times in different locations (e.g., on a hard drive at home or in a safe deposit box or in the cloud). Murphy's law—if something can go wrong, it will—can rear its ugly head in the midst of this process. One suggestion is to not upgrade everything at once, but to go step-by-step and work on one computer or workstation at a time, so that at least one computer is available for those things you must have. Or, if you're a solo and only have one machine, invest in a large external drive and make a bootable clone of your essential machine just in case. Make sure it works, that it will boot up and run things if you need it. You should be using Time Machine anyway and supplementing that with running either Carbon Copy Cloner or SuperDuper to clone your machines. Or hire someone to do all this for you.

2. Update all your software, your operating system, and the various applications you use. It makes no sense to update machines and hardware if the systems running them are not the most current. This does not mean changing operating systems, but if you have Leopard or Snow Leopard, update it to the latest iteration.

3. Back up/clone your computers again after the update so your clone is working as well as possible. Of course, if the new updated software doesn't work, at least you have clone #1 to go back to.

4. Clean out unneeded things ("cruft"). Check your applications; if you haven't used some of them for years, it's time to save them to a DVD and take them off your computer. There are applications that will speed this process along and get all the little bits and bytes that might otherwise be left behind. Also, go into your System Preferences and go through each to make sure they're as streamlined as possible. In the Accounts area, turn off or deselect login items you don't really need to load at the very beginning of a start-up. It'll speed up the restarts. Kissell's book discusses other types of cruft to

clean out, particularly caches. Also, do an online search for "how to improve speed of my Mac," and you'll find loads of articles, including some by Kissell.

5. Back up again! After all this hard work, you wouldn't want to go back to a pre–hard work version of your computer if something happens. And after all that, work with your computer a bit and see whether, in fact, the hard work you did getting to this point resulted in a "leaner and meaner" machine. If so, you might be able to defer the decision to upgrade.

There are some additional steps you can take to avoid going out and buying a new computer. After all, why do that if a relatively inexpensive purchase will suffice. Find your Mac's specifications: In the upper-left corner of the screen is an Apple icon, and under it is "About this Mac"; click that and you can see the memory, hard drive space, processor speed, and more. You can also find the information you need at websites such as LowendMac.com, OWC, and EveryMac.com.

Perhaps the easiest and quickest improvement is adding RAM to the machine. If you're running on only 2 G of memory, the addition of 2 G more might benefit you greatly. If you go to any memory vendor—Crucial, Kingston, etc.—you can find not only what memory you should have but also how to install it yourself. It's a very easy task, as long as you make sure there's no static, the machine is totally unplugged, and you're grounded! A helpful article can be found on AppStorm: "How and Why to Upgrade Your Mac's RAM". No doubt there are many others.

Buying and installing a hard drive would be a more difficult upgrade. I've done it and it's really not *that* hard—but I made sure I had two cloned backups just in case. Still more difficult upgrades might be made to the graphics (video) card or the processor; that's a job for which I would hire an expert, rather than tackling it myself. But you can be assured that all the vendors of the various parts and materials to upgrade your Mac gain nothing by having you mess up the project. So they provide the requisite supplies, as well as instructional pamphlets included with the packaging or even videos on their websites. Do some online research to find the best vendors.

If you don't feel particularly adept at all this, or if your time is worth more than this production, certainly consider getting a newer computer and using your old one as a backup. In fact, it can be used as a stand-alone fax machine, a gaming console, an aquarium, or for any number of other, creative purposes. But, having decided to get another or newer computer, make sure of what you're getting.

If you're not comfortable with using the latest and greatest operating systems (e.g., moving up to Lion), you might consider buying a refurbished model without the latest software. Of the various electronic items I own, a good portion of them were purchased from the Apple Store as clearance or refurbished items.

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If refurbished, they're under warranty, and you can get AppleCare or other policies to extend the warranty. Besides Apple, there are a number of reliable and knowledgeable vendors—PowerMax and Small Dog, among them—that not only sell new Apple product but also a line of used or refurbished items. Other reliable resources could be friends or others in your city who are involved in an Apple MUG (Macintosh Users Group). Some will be quite knowledgeable, careful in the use of their equipment, and ready to part with something in order to upgrade what they have. And there is always Craigslist or eBay; I have done fine with eBay purchases but have not tried to purchase on Craigs-list yet. Whatever source you choose, be quite careful and check out the seller's history first.

As you can see, there are a number of considerations in deciding to update, upgrade, or buy new. There are plenty of websites and blogs you can find with loads of helpful information and hints. And you can always go to the Apple site itself and its support pages for discussions and pointers. I've found the community discussion forums to be very helpful in answering questions. Whatever you do, enjoy your newish computer and put it to work for you!