

Protecting Electronic Data

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If you were getting rid of your wallet, would you throw it out with your driver's license and credit cards still in it? As silly and absurd as that may sound, that's essentially what you're doing whenever you upgrade or replace your computer without first properly erasing all the files in its hard drive.

Technology has made our lives simpler and more productive through its ease of communicating information, including sensitive personal information. That ease of use has also created a whole new set of issues and problems around the protection of electronic data stored on our computers.

Case in point: think of all the personal and sensitive information sitting in your company's computers: including employee birthdates, SIN numbers, payroll information, financial information, sales figures, contracts, and passwords, just to name a few.

With technology changing so fast nowadays, computer equipment becomes obsolete a lot quicker. The result is that businesses that depend on technology find it necessary to upgrade or replace their computers every few years. But what to do with old computer equipment? Although selling it is an option, most businesses don't have the time or can't be bothered. Other options include donating the equipment to schools, churches, or non-profit charities. While this may be the most attractive option, most

businesses don't give enough thought to the potential consequences of getting rid of computer equipment with old files still intact.

The danger of course is that personal information sitting in the hard drive of old computers could be a gold mine for identity thieves. Identity thieves know that most people and businesses don't know how to correctly erase hard drive data before giving or selling their computers. Destroying hard drive data is not as easy as most people think. Computer users often mistakenly believe that deleting a file and dumping it into the desktop recycling bin is a quick and easy way to get rid of data. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. When you delete a file it doesn't mean that the file is gone for good. Deleting really just conceals information from the operating system so that you cannot access it using normal tools. The bad news, or the good news (if a file was deleted by mistake), is that most computer geeks can restore the deleted file with a few quick maneuvers by running special programs. Formatting a hard drive also does not permanently erase data so that it cannot be recovered.

So what are the options for properly destroying or erasing electronic information? One effective method of permanently destroying data is to have the hard drive degaussed. A degauser is a device that destroys the data and demagnetizes the drive. One potential drawback to this

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option is that once a hard drive has been degaussed, it is pretty much rendered useless and thus cannot be reused.

The second option is to purchase one of many software programs out there that will properly wipe or scrub the drive clean. Many of these common software programs will permanently erase hard drive data by overwriting everything with a predetermined pattern of meaningless information. To better understand how this works, think of a video tape that has recorded TV shows on it. Now imagine finding a channel completely full of static and then recording over the entire tape.

The third and most extreme method is through the physical destruction of the hard drive. Physical destruction could take many forms, such as smashing the hard drive into many pieces or literally burning it.

Properly destroying personal information whether in paper format or electronic format is now a requirement under B.C.'s privacy law. Far from being a compliance issue, destroying personal and sensitive business information is simply good business. Failure to properly destroy or erase files before selling or donating your computers can put your business at risk. ■

Bailey Jung is the owner of Silver Bullet Shredding, a locally owned document destruction company. Silver Bullet Shredding provides secure, on-site document shredding services to small and mid-sized businesses. Contact: 604.708.4200 or www.silverbulletshredding.com.