

By Jeff Dray

Recently, I had to replace my aging computer system. If I tell you that parts of it were used in the days of Windows 3.11, you'll get the idea. The floppy drive was used when I installed my first Windows 95 OS, and the case has definitely seen better days. It was going to cost a lot to bring it into the 21st century, and a little online research showed me that it would be cheaper to buy a ready-made PC. What a terrible confession for a tech to make!

I unchained my Visa card from the vault located in the lowest crypt of my stately home, blew off the cobwebs, and went online. Soon, a shiny new PC arrived at my door. So fast, so smooth, so quiet, so empty. And no floppy drive. Instead, there's a built-in card reader, so that transferring my digital photographs after a day walking in the Purbeck Hills is a breeze.

I copied all my words of wisdom onto a pile of CDRs, (I can't run a DVD burner on the old box), and I remembered to export my bookmarks to my USB stick--but completely forgot about my address book, cookies, and mail folders.

Here's a checklist to prevent anyone else having to go back to an old system when the new one is so much more fun. In a working context, it's more typical to have centralized mail and document folders, but this approach doesn't work for offsite workers, who need to carry such things locally. I hope this checklist will help you make sure that getting a replacement PC doesn't mean losing all that you hold dear.

1 Backups

Yes, that boring old process, but this time with a difference. Any files and folders you want to keep should be burned onto CDs or a memory stick. Better still, why not pair the two systems with a crossover cable so you can simply drag and drop the files you want to keep? Files copied to a CDR will be flagged as read-only, so remember to go into folder properties and reset this once you've loaded everything to your new system. When you copy your files to your new hard disk, it may be worth using separate partitions for system and data files. This will be a Godsend if you ever have to format and reload the operating system, because your valuable files will be protected.

2 Bookmarks and Favorites

You've been collecting your bookmarks for a long time, so they're well worth keeping. Use your browser's export function to save them. Again, save them to a memory stick or CDR. Take the opportunity to remove any old, dead, and unloved links.

3 Cookies

Cookies can be a pain, but they can also help with sites you sign into automatically. If you export the cookies, you'll be able to get onto those sites without trying to remember the password. Most browsers support exporting cookies. In Internet Explorer, there is an Import/Export Wizard on the File menu that's easy to use. Mozilla Firefox offers an Import Wizard on its File menu, which will import Internet Options, Cookies, Browsing History, Saved Passwords, and other data from Internet Explorer. It might be useful to allow Internet Explorer to import everything and then run this feature to set up Firefox to run in the same manner.

4 Mail folders

Your mail client will have an export function allowing you to export your message folders to removable storage and load them to the new system. Some of my messages go back a long time, including some from my late father. I would hate to lose them. Failing that approach, track down the path to your mail folder. In Outlook, go to Tools | Options, select the Mail Setup tab, and click on the Data Files button. When you have tracked down the folders, copy them to a disk and reload them to your new system.

5 Mail account settings

You may find that you can't remember your mail settings. But there are a few things you have to know to set up your new mail client. Here's a quick checklist of what you need:

- Both mail server names, POP and SMTP
- Login name
- Password
- E-mail address
- Account name

If you can't remember the password, don't worry. There are some downloadable utilities that can decrypt this for you. Just do a Google search to track them down.

6 Address Book

Export your address book to a spreadsheet. Not only can you then import it into your new mail client but as a spreadsheet it is a great opportunity to clear out all those old contacts that are no longer valid. I forgot to do this and had the awful job of unplugging my new PC and setting up the old one to extract information.

7 Antivirus

It's easy to forget to load an effective antivirus package. While you're preparing all the stuff you need to transfer, download the latest updates and add them to the CD. This will mean you can protect your PC *before* connecting to the Internet. Essential when you consider that according to one report, an unprotected computer will, on average, have to be connected for less than 12 minutes before being attacked by some kind of virus or malware.

8 Spyware

As with #7, there are many packages to install. Make sure that you have everything ready to load when you unpack the new box.

9 Ad blockers

Most modern browsers claim to block ads for you. However, I've found that it's sometimes beneficial to employ the "Belt and Braces Principle" and load additional protection. Again, check that you've downloaded what you need so that you can preload it before connecting.

10 Applications


It probably took you years to organize your system the way you like it. You'll probably won't care about some things you have loaded. But for those you do, make sure you've tracked down the installation disks *and* product keys. The process will be easier if you prepare a list of applications and check the list as you install. While you're about it, take the opportunity to remove the free bundled software that you won't ever use.

Follow these steps, and you'll have a system that is new and reliable yet has everything you liked about your old PC. One final note: Remember that your wallpaper images will need to be recovered as well, unless you want to make a complete break and try some news ones. My new PC arrived in the spring, when the gorse was flowering on the heath land around my home. I now have a wallpaper of gorse flowers to remind me that spring is all about new beginnings as well as new PCs.

The author christened his new PC with custom wallpaper.



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Version history

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