

New PC or New Motherboard?

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If you don't want to spend big bucks on a new PC, consider upgrading your old system's motherboard and CPU. This can boost the machine's performance and give you access to the latest technologies. It can also save you hundreds of dollars.

What you won't get is a new hard drive, optical drive, or operating system, though the new motherboard gives you the option of upgrading these components later. When you do it yourself, you choose the make, model, and cost that serve you best, rather than settling for what's preloaded in an off-the-shelf machine.

For as little as \$200 to \$350, you can purchase a motherboard with a new Pentium 4 or Athlon processor and 512MB of RAM. (Visit this link to check the latest motherboard prices.) That's hundreds of dollars less than the retail cost of a midrange PC that supports AGP 8X graphics cards, Serial ATA drives, and the other advanced features that your new motherboard is likely to offer.

Motherboard Buyers Guide

Size matters: Most desktop PCs sold in the last few years conform to the ATX form factor (as do most motherboards), but not all do. Many small or ultrabudget systems are based on other designs, and some PCs from HP/Compaq, IBM, and other big-name vendors aren't ATX-compatible. Refer to your computer's documentation to see if the new motherboard will fit inside its case.

Find the right CPU: The optimal combination of CPU price and performance may lead you to early versions of Athlon XP and Pentium 4 processors: Retail boxed versions of 1- to 2-GHz AMD Athlon XP processors cost less than \$100, while Pentium 4 processors running at comparable speeds are less than \$130. OEM versions of both (that's minus the fancy box, the cooling fan, and sometimes a warranty) may be priced considerably lower. Avoid older Pentium 4 processors with 256KB of L2 cache. CPUs with 512KB cache are faster and well worth the small added expense.

Be picky: Steer clear of no-name vendors and buy from established manufacturers only.

Pay for power: Your old PC's power supply may not have enough wattage or may lack the 12-volt amperage needed to run some Pentium 4 and Athlon motherboards. Check the new motherboard's requirements against the specs on your power supply. If in doubt, buy a power supply that generates 300 watts or more,

Faster is better: A motherboard's frontside bus speed is the rate at which data moves between the CPU and RAM. FSB speed can have a greater effect on overall system performance than listed CPU speed, which is a multiple of the FSB speed. The faster the FSB, the better.

Get it all: Your new motherboard needs PCI slots and USB ports, two UltraATA/100 connectors, parallel and serial ports (if you use these), and at least two DIMM slots for RAM (DDR RAM is best). For a little extra money, you can get Serial ATA, ethernet, RAID, FireWire, Wi-Fi, and other advanced features.

Sight and sound off: Some low-cost motherboards have sound and graphics functions built in. The quality of these integrated functions is often marginal. Make sure that any built-in sound and graphics can be disabled, and that separate audio and graphics boards can be added.

Minimize Your Mousing

For people in a hurry, every unnecessary mouse movement is an aggravation. Windows 2000, Me, and XP let you set the pointer to automatically move to commonly used buttons in dialog boxes. Click Start, Settings, Control Panel (or Start, Control Panel in XP), and click or double-click Mouse (choose "Printers and Other Hardware" first if you're in XP's Categories view, or "View all Control Panel options" if you're in Me's "commonly used" view). Now select Pointer Options, check the box labeled "Automatically move pointer to the default button in a dialog box" (the option's wording varies slightly in Windows 2000), and click OK.