Cheap & Free are False Economies

With Christmas fast approaching and the cold weather setting in—let's count the places you can get a computer (desktop or laptop) for less than £400. Most computer shops and suppliers fit the bill, and some places are even giving away free laptops!

But what false economies (and clever marketing) these are!

The trick with cheap computers is one I have seen time and again. Pre-loaded with all sorts of applications, which largely go unused, and slow the PC down from day one. Add to that some 'overweight' Internet security software, and before you know it you are ready to throw your new PC out of the window.

It is also uncommon for anyone to buy the advertised model—everyone wants a bigger something, which pushes the cost up for a PC still based on the cheapest core technology.
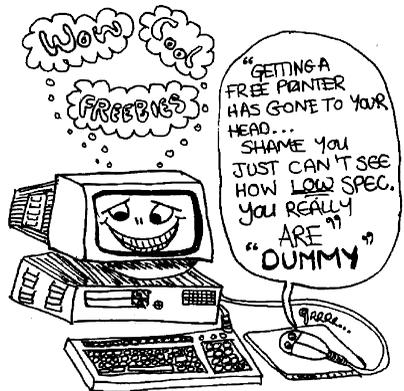
So what's the answer? Set yourself a realistic budget—I normally advise around £500-600 for a good all-rounder—and get the best that you can afford. See if you can save money by keeping your old monitor, printer, etc and not have to get a new one. Of course, individual circumstances will vary; don't let anyone sell you a PC if they haven't listened to what you want.

You could do a lot worse than to buy a computer review magazine or two, as most give a good explanation as to what the numbers all mean.

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Of course, you CAN speed up a slow computer, but you will want to get expert advice about what to add and what to remove.

Consider also the pre-loaded operating system—often Windows XP Home or Vista Home. Neither of these will give you the professional features you need in an office environment, as Windows Home will not connect to a network server.

Finally, remember that a slower PC takes longer to fix, so your per-hour callout costs might double, and it will quickly seem not worth fixing since "a new PC is only £400"—setting up a vicious cycle.

PC Do's and Dont's:
✓ DO check what software you get, and what you don't get. MS Office (including Word and Excel) is NOT part of Windows
✓ DO buy the best that you can afford
✓ DO get expert advice on slow PCs
✓ DON'T expect Windows Home to connect to your company server!