

For the 10th in our series, let's consider hard drives. They are somewhat expensive add-on items for the old XT "clunker" you picked up for \$25, but at today's prices for even new units, in the realm of possibility. Large hard drives (500 Mbytes and up) can be purchased for about a buck a megabyte, but I don't recommend spending \$500 for one to put in your \$25 computer. That is too much cash outlay and you probably don't need all that space. Smaller units, 40 Mbytes, can be purchased new for \$100 at this writing (Oct 93). Used hard drives are even cheaper; a 40-megabyte (40 million byte) unit can be purchased for around twenty bucks. That's 50 cents a megabyte. Pretty cheap when you consider that a high density (1.2 Mb) floppy will cost you around half a buck or more. Used drives are plentiful and cheap (as are used computers) because many people are upgrading their home computer hard drive to 100 Mbytes or larger. Is a 40 Mb unit big enough for you? If you are using the computer for home and ham use, most certainly! You can put a word processor, YAPP (Yet Another Packet Program, the best Packet Radio program around), a whole bunch of utilities, a few games, and all the necessary DOS files on it and still have well over 30 megabytes of space left. No doubt about it, 40 Mbytes is a lot of space.

What do you need and how do you do it? First of all, any hard drive you wish to install in an XT must also have a controller card. The controller is a plug-in printed circuit board that does just what its name implies; it controls the hard drive, and presents data taken from it in a format your computer can understand. The controller plugs in to a slot, so you must have at least one unused slot open. Pop the computer's cover and look in to determine this.

Second, if new or used, be sure the drive/controller combination will work with an XT class computer. Some combinations will not - IDE (Integrated Drive Electronics) drives come with a controller that is made for plugging into an AT class (286/386/486) computer. They WILL work with an XT, but you must purchase a special controller card for the job.

If you purchase new, I recommend Hard Drives International (recently acquired by Insight) at 1-800-488-0004. They specialize in hard drives, are extremely knowledgeable and helpful, and they provide superb documentation with their products including a "how to" manual with each drive they sell. Furthermore, their prices are excellent and they will even tell you which drive is the best buy at the moment (they stock products of all major manufacturers). If you call them, be sure you know exactly what type (and brand) of machine the drive is intended for. They will give you good advice on the phone.

If you purchase a used drive/controller unit, the best course of action is to get someone knowledgeable to help you install it and set it up. It is not a difficult job for someone who knows what they are doing, but it can be complex for someone who does not.

By the way, if you have a hard drive you think is broken, don't throw it away. Some repair shops (there are only a few in the country, because it takes a special "clean room" to open and mechanically repair drives) will repair it for you. However, compare carefully their repair charges with the cost of a new unit. If a new unit is a more cost-effective route for you, some of the repair shops will purchase your old unit for rebuilding purposes.

Some drives that people think are mechanically broken are not; these can be repaired by software manipulation. After attending an Advanced Troubleshooting and Repair seminar a few weeks ago, I rescued 4 such units, just for the practice (hard drive repair is not my profession!). Donate that dead drive to someone who can play with it. Give it to me; if I fix it, I will give it away to someone who can use it. How's that for an offer? Happy computing.