

Investigation

Our undercover researchers put stores' claims to the test



report by
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Under discussion

- Can PC repair shops be trusted?
- How to protect yourself from unscrupulous shops

Jargon

Explanations for terms in light blue ([like this](#)) can be found in our Jargon Buster on page 51



PC World repairs in a fix

We find shops making costly errors and giving bad advice – particularly PC World

Many of us know little about how our computers work, so if something goes wrong we rely on a PC repair shop to put it right. But some repairers are exploiting our ignorance.

When we took PCs with simple faults to be repaired, we found stores that overcharged for easy repairs and misdiagnosed basic problems. Some branches of the best-known chain, PC World, even wrongly advised us to buy a new computer.

What's more, the difference in costs was staggering. Prices ranged from £10 to £139 to fix a loose cable, and from £20 to £260 to correct a simple software problem (see 'What we did', right, for more information). So what can you do to avoid these problems? Our investigation suggests you should

stick with trusted local independent shops; going to PC World could be a costly mistake.

LOOSE CABLE? SIMPLY BUY A NEW COMPUTER

PC World's misdiagnosis of simple problems led to costly repair bills – and potentially even more costly advice to buy new computers we didn't need. For example, PC World in London's Tottenham Court Road misdiagnosed the simple software problem as a corrupted **hard disk**. It told us the repair would cost at least £350 and recommended we buy a new PC instead.

It had a similar approach to a PC which had a loose cable. It failed to spot the real problem and again advised us to

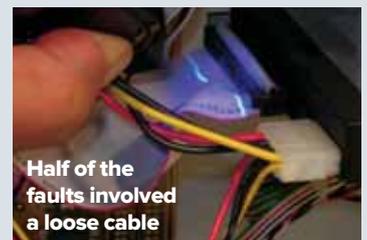
> What we did

We installed Windows XP and a collection of software, documents, images and music onto desktop computers. We marked the components inside the PCs with an ultra-violet pen so that we could check later whether any parts were replaced.

The computers were then deliberately 'broken'. On half, we deleted a file that helps to start up the Windows **operating system**. This file can become corrupted and is fixed by copying the file from another computer, as confirmed by Microsoft's online knowledgebase. On the remaining PCs we loosened a cable that connects the hard disk to the rest of the computer.

Both faults can occur on home PCs, so any repair shop should be able to use the onscreen **error messages** to diagnose and fix the computer. They should then be able to restore the PCs to working order without losing any data.

Our undercover fieldworkers booked appointments with 20 PC



Half of the faults involved a loose cable

repairers – seven branches of PC World and 13 independents. Where possible, we visited each one with both types of fault. In the end, we visited PC World 14 times and the independents 18 times.

We went to several PC World stores because it's the only big chain that repairs PCs it didn't sell.

After each repair, the computers went back to the lab to be assessed by our expert.

buy a new PC. When our fieldworker insisted that the shop fix the PC, it told us it would cost £400 for a new hard disk and software.

Presumably at some point an employee plugged in the cable, because when we next contacted the shop it said the PC was working again; the repair charge would be a more reasonable £69.99. But the store said that we might need a new **processor**, **motherboard**, hard disk and software – which would cost £669 in total. We paid the £69.99 and went on our way.

There was a similar problem at the Oxford branch; it misdiagnosed a PC with a loose cable as having a corrupted hard disk, quoted £300 for a repair and implied we'd be better off with a new PC.

But when we got all these PCs back to our lab, our experts found they were fine – once repaired, there was absolutely no need to replace them. This is a big problem: PC World is advising customers to fork out hundreds of pounds for unnecessary repairs or to scrap perfectly good PCs and buy new ones. It needs to address this situation urgently.

A spokesman from PC World's head office told us: 'It is not always possible to diagnose a PC fault accurately at first assessment, but the engineer will be able to get the PC working again through a remastering process or replacing components. This can often be an iterative process.'

SHORTCUT REPAIRS LOSE CUSTOMERS' DATA

Here's another problem with the repairs – if a shop wants to cut corners and not bother finding the actual cause of a software fault, it can just reinstall Windows. That's handy for the shop but very bad for the customer: if you hadn't backed up your data, you'd lose everything on your PC – photos, music, documents and all.

We were flabbergasted to discover that two branches of PC World (Milton Keynes and Northampton) – as well as three of the 13 independents – reinstalled Windows to fix the software problem. It could have been easily fixed by copying a file from another computer.

Our fieldworker asked PC World in Northampton what was wrong with the PC. One of its employees said: 'The actual Windows had collapsed on it, so you'd got no operating system on there.' This was inaccurate – Windows was on

If you hadn't backed up your data, you'd lose everything on your PC

the computer but a file needed to be replaced to make it work properly.

THE PC WORLD PRICING LOTTERY

Those two PC World stores' preference for reinstalling Windows isn't just bad for the documents and photos you have on your PC. It's also more costly than a repair of the real cause of the problem. But how much more costly is something of a lottery.

Both branches sold us a boxed copy of Windows XP Home (that we didn't need) and then installed it – but Milton Keynes charged us £220 and Northampton a whopping £260. What's more, the Milton Keynes store had told us the job would cost £189. When we asked PC World why its shops

were charging different amounts, a spokesperson told us: 'We charge £29.99 for a software installation and £69.99 for a PC repair. The key difference between the two jobs is the diagnosis of the fault.'

But our fieldworkers gave both stores the same information about the problem, so there shouldn't be a difference in diagnosis or price. PC World's website charges £200 for Windows XP Home so, with the £29.99 charge for software installation, the cost should have been £229.99 – certainly not £260.

It wasn't only labour where PC World's prices were inconsistent. Stores also proved unable to agree on how much a boxed copy of Windows XP Home should cost: Tottenham Court Road quoted £200, Northampton £190 and



Antonia's family was left without a laptop for six weeks

PC shop fails to deliver on promises

Antonia Chitty was impressed by a PC repair shop's claim to be able to collect, fix and deliver broken laptops within 48 hours. So when her laptop's battery stopped recharging she gave the shop a ring. It collected her computer promptly but said she'd have to

wait more than 48 hours as a part had to be ordered.

Six weeks later, Antonia got fed up waiting and asked for her laptop to be returned. According to Antonia, the shop said it would be delivered in full working order. But the laptop didn't turn up

so after taking legal advice Antonia's husband went to collect it. He asked to be invoiced for the repair, as he didn't want to hand over the £150 fee until he was sure that the laptop was fixed.

When Antonia tested the laptop at home, she discovered

the battery still wouldn't recharge.

We spoke to the shop which denied it had claimed to have fixed the laptop and said that it had never invoiced Antonia for any work.

The laptop has now been repaired by a shop recommended by her insurance firm.

Tottenham Hale £169. On one visit to Enfield we were told £200 and on another £180; on two visits to Oxford we were quoted £230 and £180. Visit the wrong branch at the wrong time, and you'd be paying £60 extra.

SHOPS THAT REFUSED TO LOOK AT THE PCs

On six occasions, branches of PC World refused to look at our computers unless we had either a boxed copy of Windows or a recovery disc – even though the faults on our PCs needed neither disc for the repair. (None of the independents refused to examine our computers for this reason.)

We asked PC World to explain its policy. 'If the customer does not have this [the recovery discs] then we may have to sell them a new copy of Windows as Microsoft's copyright and licensing policy restricts the ability to reproduce recovery media. However, this [lack of discs] should not be a reason not to offer the customer a repair,' said a spokesperson.

PC World's HQ needs to let its stores know this – particularly the Oxford branch. It not only refused to fix our PC on one visit, but wouldn't look at the computer even after we offered to buy a copy of Windows from its shelves.

THE BAD INDEPENDENTS

It wasn't only PC World where the service proved disappointing. Four of the 13 independent repairers failed to correctly

repair the software problem by simply replacing the missing file. Three reinstalled Windows and another trader carried out additional unnecessary work by replacing the computer's hard disk, saying it had become corrupted. The bill for replacing the hard disk and installing Windows XP came to £249.

We asked for the original hard disk back so we could test whether the shop's diagnosis was correct. It wasn't – our expert confirmed the original hard disk was working perfectly.

When we took a computer with a loose cable into the same shop, it again claimed the hard disk had become corrupted and would need replacing. This time it charged us £139. When we got the computer back to our lab we were shocked to discover the PC still contained the original hard disk, complete with our ultraviolet markings.

In response the repairer claimed he has 'never charged for work not done and never charged for parts that are not faulty, only if the customer wants me to do so [in relation to] an upgrade to a larger hard drive'. We've passed his details on to Trading Standards.

VERDICT

In spite of these few poor repairs, the majority of independents we visited provided good repairs, particularly in the case of the hardware fault. Our fieldworkers were impressed by the service they received – some shops even

helped to carry the mended computers out to the researchers' cars.

Prices are generally lower at independents, too – the majority of independents charged less than £100 to fix either fault. The lowest prices came from shops which didn't charge for a diagnosis; for example, Creative Image Computers in Bicester charged £10 to repair the loose cable fault and we paid CSG in Northampton just £20 for the software fault. By contrast, on two occasions PC World asked for in excess of £200 to rectify the software problem.

So until PC World improves staff training, we wouldn't recommend its repair service. We found inconsistent prices and staff at some branches misdiagnosed simple faults. Only three of the seven PC World branches fixed the loose cable – and one of these suggested we spend £669 replacing components. The rest refused to examine the PCs without discs or recommended that we buy replacement PCs we didn't need.

We asked PC World what it would say to anyone worried about using its repair service. 'We always strive to offer the highest level of service and our repairs are carried out on a no-fix, no-fee basis,' said a spokesperson. We think PC World needs to 'strive' harder.

'It is not always possible to diagnose a PC fault accurately at first assessment'
Spokesman for PC World

Good shop

CSG in Northampton was one of the best independent shops our team visited. We asked CSG for the secret of its good service. 'We have an open workshop where customers can watch and talk to engineers. Our approach means nothing's hidden from the customer,' said Leon Bunker.



Top tips for a fuss-free repair

- Ask friends and family to recommend a repair shop
- Check whether the shop charges (1) to look at the PC or (2) by the hour or (3) offers a flat fee for certain repairs
- Get a quote beforehand for labour and parts
- Tell the store to get your permission before going ahead with any work costing above a certain price
- Instruct the shop to ask before it replaces any software or hardware. If it does have to, ask whether you'd lose data

PHOTOGRAPHY MARTIN MAYER