Did your PC suffer a catastrophic failure requiring new hardware? Have you upgraded to better components and Windows 10 just doesn't recognize your PC? This guide shows you how to reactivate Windows 10 after a hardware change.

What Counts As a Hardware Change?

That's an area even Microsoft won't fully explain. Instead, the company provides this statement on its website:

“If you make significant hardware changes on your device, such as replacing your motherboard, Windows will no longer find a license that matches your device, and you’ll need to reactivate Windows to get it up and running.”

Documents retrieved by Paul Thurrott, however, state that hard drive replacement does not fall under Microsoft’s “substantial change” label.

Digital License for Pre-Built Systems

The big reactivation roadblock likely stems from laptops and desktops pre-built by Acer, Dell, HP, Samsung, and so on. For a long time, these OEMs printed product keys on labels stuck to the PC’s chassis.

Since the days of Windows 8, manufacturers have stored keys in the BIOS or ACPI table (via UEFI) located on the motherboard. If you need to reinstall the operating system for any reason, Windows 10 will retrieve that key during activation.
The move to onboard keys stems from piracy. Microsoft simply doesn't want customers installing Windows on multiple computers using a single key. The company originally dubbed this one-key-per-device method “digital entitlement” but began using the term “digital license” with Windows 10 Anniversary Update. Keys now link to your Microsoft account.

That said, reactivation can be problematic if you manually replace the motherboard in a pre-built PC. The embedded key is lost, requiring a call to Microsoft to verify the hardware change.

A call to the OEM may be helpful, too, if you originally registered the product and explain the problem. However, Windows 10 for OEMs typically cannot be moved to other PCs.

**Product Keys for System Builders**

System builders purchase Windows 10 “product keys” directly from retailers, including Amazon, Microsoft, Newegg, and more. They’re either printed, emailed, or stored in an online account.

Customers type these keys into a requested prompt during the Windows 10 setup process. Like OEM-based installs, these keys are tied to Microsoft accounts.

The difference here is that reactivation is less problematic given a product key isn't embedded in the motherboard. Unfortunately, Microsoft doesn't fully explain its “significant hardware change” term.

However, replacing a single component—such as swapping out memory sticks or upgrading a discrete GPU—typically doesn't lock customers out of Windows 10. But a major overhaul to multiple components could make the PC unrecognizable.

The good news is that system builders can run the Windows 10 Update Troubleshooter to un-assign the product key from the previous PC configuration and reassign it to the new build. Keep in mind that the number of activations is limited.

In short, you can move this license to another PC, but not indefinitely.

**Upgrades from Windows 7/8/8.1**

In this case, customers don't have a Windows 10 key, nor is a key embedded in the BIOS or UEFI. Instead, they can apply the same product key used to upgrade to Windows 10. Reactivation will depend on the PC: Is it a pre-built system or hand-built from scratch?

**Reactivate Windows 10 Using a Digital License**
Use this guide if you’re reinstalling Windows 10 without a printed or emailed product key. If Windows 10 can retrieve your key from the motherboard, then there’s nothing else you need to do. If your PC endured a “significant hardware change” making it unrecognizable, then press on.

If You Reinstall Windows 10 from Scratch

When you first begin reinstalling Windows 10, the setup process prompts you to enter a product key. Since this copy doesn’t have a key, click on the “I Don't Have a Product Key” link.

Windows 10 will prompt you for the version you own (Home, Pro, etc). After that, select “Custom: Install Windows Only” in the next window. This isn't an upgrade given you're starting from scratch.
Follow the setup instructions until you reach the desktop.

If Windows 10 remains intact on a surviving drive, you don't need to reinstall. Instead, load up Windows 10 and reactivate through the Settings app as explained in the following steps.

Reactivate from Within Windows 10

First, click the Start button followed by the “gear” icon located along the Start Menu's left edge. This opens the Settings app.
Click the “Update & Security” tile. You can also hit the “Windows Isn’t Activated. Activate Windows Now” link at the bottom of the Settings app.

Select “Activation” listed in the menu to the left. You should see a message on the right stating “Windows Can’t be Activated on Your Device” or something similar. Click the “Troubleshoot” link shown under the warning.

In the following popup, click the “I Changed Hardware on This Device Recently” link.

Windows reported that no product key was found on your device. Error code: 0xCO04F213
If you’re having problems with activation, select Troubleshoot to try and fix the problem.
Enter your Microsoft account credentials and select the “Sign In” button. You’ll see a list of your devices. Select the device with the changed hardware and check the box next to “This Is the Device I’m Using Right Now.”

Select “Activate” to proceed.

Reactivate Windows 10 Using a Product Key

Use this guide if you built a PC from scratch and purchased a copy of Windows 10. This method requires a special key—printed or emailed—to activate Windows 10.

This guide also covers devices with printed product keys stuck to the side, like an older Windows 8.1 laptop upgraded to Windows 10.
If You Reinstall Windows 10 from Scratch

When you first begin reinstalling Windows 10, the setup process prompts you to enter a product key. Enter the code and click the “Next” button.

After that, select “Custom: Install Windows Only” in the next window. This isn't an upgrade given you're starting from scratch.
Follow the setup instructions until you reach the desktop.

If Windows 10 remains intact on a surviving drive, you don’t need to reinstall. Instead, load up Windows 10 and reactivate through the Settings app as explained in the following steps.

Reactivate from Within Windows 10

First, click the Start button followed by the “gear” icon located along the Start Menu's left edge. This opens the Settings app.

Click the “Update & Security” tile.
Select “Activation” listed in the menu to the left and then click the “Change Product Key” link on the right listed under the “Update Product Key” heading.

Enter the product key in the pop-up window and click the “Next” button.
Reactivate Windows 10 Using Microsoft Chat Support

This isn’t the ideal solution, but if you experience issues reactivating Windows 10 using the previous two methods, you might need to contact Microsoft and explain the situation. You can message a Windows Advisor, schedule a call, or request a callback.

Microsoft’s support line is often very helpful if you’re doing something reasonable. The support staff have leeway to activate a Windows license even if it can’t be activated automatically.

Microsoft’s troubleshooters have made contacting support less necessary these days, but it was traditionally used to solve many activation problems.