

By Carole Levitt and Elliott Stern

Three Simple Steps to Maintain Computer Efficiency

At the office and at home, computer tune-up schedules save users time and heartache

A computer, like any other machine, needs maintenance. Regular maintenance enhances a computer's performance and ultimately its user's performance. At the office, individual users should not assume that the network administrator is taking care of each office computer. Rather, a discussion with the administrator can produce a plan to keep the user's computer in shape without creating problems on the network. At home or at the office, on a network or not, fifteen minutes each week spent running a few daily and weekly tests and maintenance procedures can avert crashes and time-wasting sluggish performance.

Listless performance can include slow saves, programs and documents that open slowly, the inability to run a spell checker, and even the inability to scroll down a large document. What causes sluggishness? Leaky memory, a fragmented hard drive, and insufficient hard disk space are three major culprits.¹

Leaky memory inevitably occurs as a part of a computer's operation. Such commonplace tasks as opening programs, saving work, and closing programs all day long cause the computer's memory to leak, because when these tasks are completed the memory that was allocated to perform them is not completely reallocated to Windows.

This causes the computer to begin running inefficiently, because computers run on their memory. A simple diagnostic test can determine if a computer is leaking memory. Users with Windows 95 or a later operating system can perform the test by using the mouse to left click on Start, Settings, Control Panel, System (double click), and Performance. The higher the percentage indicated in System Resources, the faster and more efficiently the computer is running.

This simple test can offer surprises. For example, a diagnostic on one computer tallied a mere 69 percent. If the percentage is low, it is time for one of the easiest and most overlooked daily maintenance steps: just restart the computer! (There is no need to shut down.

Simply click on Start, Shut Down, and then click on Restart.) After this procedure, the computer that was running at 69 percent efficiency improved to 86 percent. Depending upon the system and software add-ons, a normal start-

ing level is between 80 and 95 percent. If the computer is running at low efficiency, leaky memory may be at fault and a restart can help. Get in the habit of restarting before going to lunch, a meeting, or court. Remember to save all work and exit all programs beforehand.

A fragmented hard drive is another common problem. A computer's hard drive is like a jigsaw puzzle, and as more information is added, changed, or deleted from files over time, pieces of the files, like pieces of a puzzle, become separated. A computer, like a person, tends to scatter its files around as it uses them, and from time to time needs to reorganize them. Fragmentation forces the computer to work harder (and thus slower) as it strives to reassemble the pieces. Users can counteract this tendency by running a defragment utility once a week. The utility reassembles the separated pieces into an organized state in advance of opening programs, allowing the hard drive to work more efficiently and consequently start programs more quickly. There is no diagnostic test for fragmentation, but when Word, WordPerfect, Excel, or other programs open slowly, it can be a sign of a fragmented hard drive.

Repair Fragmented Files

Before running the defragment program, first save all work and exit all programs. Then, to ensure that the defragment utility itself runs quickly, disable the screen saver. Using the mouse, right click on any part of the desktop that is not an icon or a tool bar, left click on Properties,

the Screen Saver Tab, the arrow in the box under screen saver, scroll to None and click on Apply, then OK. Failure to disable the screen saver causes the defragment utility to start again each time the screen saver appears, prolonging the procedure.

To run the Defragment utility, left click on Start, Programs, Accessories, System Tools, and Disk Defragmenter. When asked which drive to defragment, select All Hard Drives if the computer has more than one. If the computer only has one drive, select C. In Windows 95, click OK. Windows will examine the hard drive to determine what percent is defragmented. Even if told, "You don't need to defragment this drive now," continue anyway. A drive that is fragmented only 1 percent can slow the system. Click on Advanced and make sure that there is no checkmark in the box labeled Check Drive for Errors, then click OK and Start. For Windows 98 and Windows ME, click on Settings (again, make sure there is no check in the box labeled Check Drive for Errors), then click OK.

Even if the screen saver has been disabled, there is still a chance that the defragmentation process will reset itself and begin from zero. This is indicated when the message "Drive's Contents Changed" appears before the fragmentation is complete. If this happens, take a break and let the utility program run again. Eventually it will run all the way through. After the defragmenting utility runs, return the screen saver to its original settings.

A third culprit behind a computer's sluggish performance is

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insufficient hard disk space. To diagnose this, check the hard disk space by double clicking on My Computer (the icon on the desktop), right click on C, and left click on Properties. Note the percentages identifying used and free space. With more free disk space, the computer's performance is enhanced because files can be moved around more easily and more files and programs can be kept open. The more disk space is kept free, the better. Generally, if the free space amounts to 25 percent or less, it is time to create some hard disk space.

Restoring Hard Disk Space

First, delete unnecessary files. Click on My Computer on the desktop and highlight any unnecessary folders or files and press the Delete button. This sends the folder or file to the Recycle Bin but does not actually delete the file from the hard drive (and thus does not make room) until the bin is emptied. Double click on Recycle Bin (an icon on the desktop), review the files previously deleted to be sure they are no longer needed, and click on Empty Recycle Bin. To restore a single file, click on it, click File, and click Restore.

The second way to recover disk space is to delete unneeded e-mail messages and empty the Internet disk caches from the browsers (Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer). Deleting e-mail will also improve the e-mail system's speed. In some cases, e-mail folders can be so bloated that new messages cannot even be received. Deleting mail will permit receipt of new messages.

Instead of deleting one message at a time, click on the first one to be deleted, then hold down the shift key and click on the last one to be deleted. Each message between these two will be highlighted, allowing for a wholesale deletion by clicking Delete once. If a user has multiple e-mail folders, each folder should be reviewed to identify candidates for deletion. Remember to delete both received and sent messages. Just as deleted files are routed to the Recycle Bin but do not actually get deleted until the Recycle Bin itself is emptied, deleted e-mails are routed to an e-mail trash folder and are not deleted until the trash folder is emptied. To empty trash from Netscape Communicator, go to the e-mail program, click on File (on the tool bar at the top of the screen), and click on Empty Trash on Local Mail. For MS Outlook, click on Tools, Options, Maintenance, and check the box next to Empty Messages from Deleted Items Folder on Exit.

The third way to free hard drive space (and improve Internet speed) is to clear the Internet disk cache in the Netscape Navigator browser and the Temporary Internet Files folder in the Microsoft Internet Explorer

browser. Cache or temporary Internet files appear when a user uses the back or forward arrow. After a time, however, cache files begin to clutter the system and slow the browser to a crawl. The temporary files can be cleared without connecting the computer to the Internet. It is preferable that they be cleared after each Internet session or even during a long session. To clear the Netscape Navigator disk cache, click on Edit (on top bar on the screen), Preferences, Advanced (double click), Cache, and Clear Disk Cache. To clear the Internet Explorer cache, click on Tools, Internet Options, General Tab, Temporary Internet Files, Delete Files, and OK.

Windows 98 offers a maintenance wizard, but manual maintenance is still recommended. The wizard occasionally does not complete its tasks, and proper configuration of the wizard can be elusive. In an office with a computer network, consult the network manager before performing maintenance tasks—some may already be part of the maintenance schedule. And unless your network manager makes house calls, perform regular maintenance on the computer at home. ■

¹ For more tips and computer maintenance suggestions, see ELLIOTT STERN, KEEP YOUR COMPUTER RUNNING RIGHT (2000) or e-mail techinfo@pcmaestro.com.



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