Optimizing Your Computer

With "back to school" now upon us, many of you are likely considering the possibility of purchasing a new computer. It may be that your computer isn't performing as fast as it used to but does this necessarily mean its time to buy a new system? The answer would be yes if the computer you're using has a Pentium III or older processor, or your needs have outgrown the technology you possess. On the other hand, it might be as simple as a quick tune-up that you can do yourself.

There are two simple ways to make a computer run faster. The first is the addition of hardware, which means upgrades and new components. Of course this costs money. Upgrades such as this usually start with a RAM upgrade, then lead to a new main processor, sometimes that means a new motherboard and on it can go…and its usually not cheap.

There is a second option…optimize your computer. It doesn't cost any money! Its simple to do! All the tools are there on your current system and you'll know quickly whether you can keep your older unit or its time to move on and up!

There are several easy ways to optimize your computer, some more detailed than others. These fixes are now actually designed for the user who is not an expert and doesn't have the time or desire to become one. Let's focus on changes that are easy to accomplish and will deliver noticeable improvements. Below you'll find five steps that should have your system performing like it did when it was new. These tips are for Microsoft XP Home, or XP Pro user's but can typically be adapted by windows 98 and 2000 users as well.

1) Disk cleanup
2) Defragment hard drive
3) Run an up-to-date anti-virus program
4) Run an up-to-date spyware program
5) Install updates for programs you use regularly

While all of the steps described below are easily accomplished with a minimal amount of knowledge or skill, it is suggested that you know how to get back to where you started in case any changes you make don't work out…and remember, when your computer asks you to delete a file, if you are unsure, don't do it! Better safe than sorry.

Before beginning make sure that no programs are currently in use.

Disk Cleanup

The first step will be to safely delete unnecessary files from your hard drive. Freeing up disk space can help improve the performance of your computer.
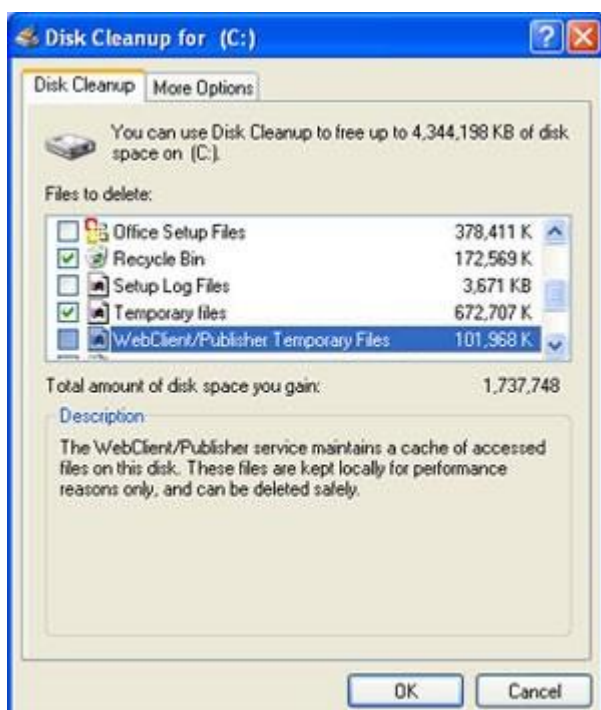
To use disk clean up
1) Left click on the "start" tab in the bottom left hand corner of your screen
2) Highlight "programs", then "accessories", followed by "system tools" and then click on "disc clean up".
3) A box will appear telling you that "Disk Cleanup" is calculating how much space you will be able to free up. This may take several minutes.
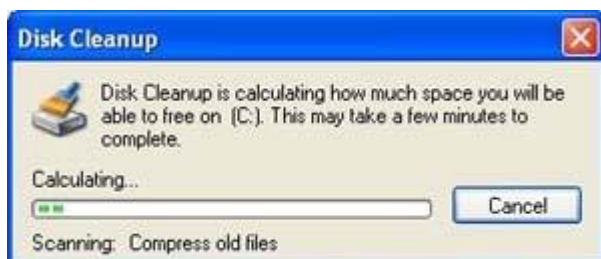
4) Check the boxes for the files you wish to delete and make sure the files you want to retain are left unchecked. In most case you can safely check most of the boxes, but make sure to check
   • Remove temporary internet files
   • Empty the recycle bin
   • Note: It is usually a good idea to leave Compress files unchecked

* Please remember if you are unsure **Do Not Check It.**

5) Click on OK, confirm your selection and the process will begin.

Defragment The Hard Drive

 When you defragment your hard drive, files are reorganized so that the system can find them faster.

To defragment your hard drive:

1) left click on the start tab in the bottom left hand corner of your screen
2) Highlight "programs", then "accessories", followed by "system tools" and then click "defragment" hard drive.
3) Click on "Defragment" and the process will begin. This will typically take about an hour to complete but can be left unattended once it has started
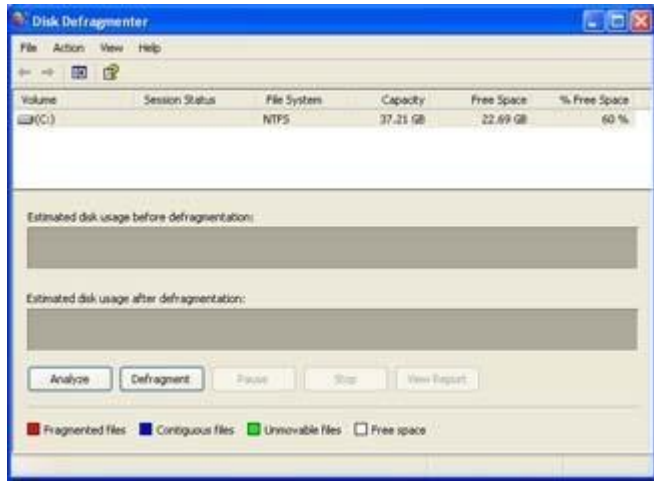
Virus Protection

If you have an Antivirus program loaded on your computer; and you most defiantly should, first make sure it's current, that it's running, and that it's updated regularly. An out of date program doesn't offer much more protection than not having protection. If you don't have an antivirus program, now is certainly a good time to get one!

Spyware Programs, like antivirus program, need to be kept current. If you don't presently have a spyware program, there are a number of good quality free ones available. You might want to try Ad-Adware (www.adwarealert.com) or Spybot – Search & Destroy (www.spybot.net). Make sure you follow the programs instructions, update them regularly, and like virus programs, run it at least once a week.

Update Programs

While this likely won't make your computer run faster, it's a good idea anyway. You should always use the most up-to-date version of your programs. Most can be updated by downloading patches from the manufacturer's website, and they are usually free. The most important program to check for updates is your computers operating system (i.e. MS Windows). This will allow your system to stay up-to-date and less vulnerable to hackers.

Conclusions

While none of these fixes will turbo-charge your system, they will certainly help restore some of the performance it originally had when you first brought it home from the store. Also, there are more advanced tools you can use, such as limiting the number of programs your computer uses on start-up or using the restore feature to literally take your computer back in time, but those are topics for another day. The five steps listed above are an excellent method to optimize your computer and get it running just like it used to saving you those two valuable commodities, time and money!

Note: The pictures in this article were taken from Microsoft's web page