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Spring!

It's the time of year that compels us to open the windows and let fresh air in. For most, it's also a time to get the stale out by that somewhat trite yet cathartic tradition called "Spring Cleaning." Next to the stack of winter clothes going to the donation center lay strewn chemical products, broken discarded toys, and "I-don't-know-what-to-do-with-this" piles.

Recently, I also became a victim – I mean, participant of this custom. As such is the proverbial can of worms, I organized the junk door, rearranged furniture, scrubbed the toilet, and yes, even cleaned my computer.

> ### A word of caution... the next sentence is not for the faint hearted.

In a University of Arizona, researchers[1] found that office computer keyboards have 400 times the amount of bacteria as the average office toilet seat.

If that doesn't make you want to include your computer in your Spring Cleaning frenzy, I don't know what will.

For the brave people wishing to tackle this venture, I offer the short list: key parts for cleaning your computer both inside and out.

Inside

Before you begin to reorganize that virtual desktop and filing cabinet, make sure you back up important files. You can use a thumb, flash, USB or external hard drive, backup online, or take a mirror image of your entire drive. Use your routine backup procedures now just in case!

System tray

Have you ever wondered why your computer ran so fast when you first got it, but after using it, installing programs, customizing it, saving files… now it seems so slow, especially on startup? Clean it up! Take a look at your system tray by clicking that arrow on the taskbar on the bottom right corner. Those small icons represent programs that start up as your computer boots.

You can turn off programs not being used with a quick right click, then click "Exit" or "Quit." However, the next time you startup your computer, they may turn on again. In order to control what background applications initialize on startup, do this:

1. On the bottom left, click the Start Button.
2. In the search box type: "run" and hit enter.
3. A "Run" dialog box will come up and ask what you want to open. In the box, type: "msconfig" and hit the OK Button.
4. Finally, a System Configuration interface appears. Under the Startup tab, you can select items to load. If you are unsure, leave it alone. But if you know the name of a resource that adds a long delay in the startup sequence and you can open it on demand instead, turn that item off by checking the box next to it.

You will be asked if you want to restart the computer, but you can opt to restart later with no ill effects.

Eliminate Programs

Your system can run faster and cleaner if you uninstall programs you no longer use. In some versions of the Windows operating system, you can use the Control Panel and see how often and when you last used each application. Again, if you are in doubt as to whether or not you need a particular program, leave it alone. Otherwise, if you no longer need it, uninstall it. The Control Panel is accessible through the Start Button at the lower left corner of your screen.

Defrag

Besides being a really cool interesting word, defragging your hard drive is useful for clearing up space and speeding up processing. Even though it may not look like it, when a file is saved to your computer, sometimes it is saved in pieces in different locations. "Defrag" stands for defragmentation; when you run this utility, your system reorganizes files and groups them back together. This allows for larger chunks of free space and a cleaner running system.

You can run a defrag from the Control Panel under the System section. If you are unsure of how to defrag, a quick search online for this task with your operation system yields ample support.

Update? Yes!

"Mom… mom…. Mom… MOM?"
"WHAT?!"

Yes, sometimes those annoying messages asking me if I want to update my already installed software remind me of my ten year old son's frequent requests! But, just like with kids' requests, generally say "Yes!" Software is designed to work with particular operating systems and in particular configurations. As Operating Systems are updated, software developers have to keep up with the changes. If your software isn't updated, it may slow your system, produce errors, or completely quit working altogether. When an update is released, the developers have fixed mistakes, discovered security vulnerabilities, or simply added features that improve your experience. If a piece of software asks if you want to automatically install updates and you use that program regularly and trust the developer, say "Yes!" especially for your antivirus and anti-malware solutions.

Clear cache

Save space on your computer by emptying those temporary Internet folders! Clean it up!

If you use Internet Explorer, in the menu, go to Tools > Delete Browsing History. Then select what you want to clear, at the minimum "Temporary Internet files and website files.

For Firefox, go to Tools > Clear Recent History. Then select what you want to clear, at the minimum the Cache with time range "Everything."

If Chrome is your weapon of choice, on the right hand side menu, select Tools > Clear Browsing Data or use the keyboard shortcut Control-Shift-Delete. At the minimum, select to "Obliterate the following items from the beginning of time" with the Empty the Cache checkbox checked.

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Out

The saying goes, "Inside and Out" not "Out and Inside" but now that I think about it, you may want to clean the "outside" of your computer first, before you spend all that time at that grungy keyboard! Before you start, it's a good idea to turn off your computer so manipulating the items you are cleaning won't affect input into your system. Again, also make sure you have backed up important items as usual.

Keyboard

Especially if you like to snack, your keyboard can be a haven for germs; but how do you clean those hard to reach places? I actually have taken off all the key faces to my laptop before, but it was a tedious task, and one I only recommend if you are experiencing severe problems with responsiveness or sticking. (I hadn't planned ahead so I had to use another computer to figure out where the keys were to be placed!)

Let's do it the easy way: First, turn your keyboard upside and shake out the big crumbs. You can lightly tap it on a desk to knock them loose. Next, use canned air to loosen smaller pieces. You might notice dust bunnies gathering on one end, so push down on an adjacent key while pulling the clump out with a pair of tweezers. Small vacuums are made especially for computers and keyboards, so if you happen to have the luxury of one, it can save you time. Finally, use a disinfectant wipe to go over the keyboard. Do not use spray disinfectant as electronics and moisture are not a good combination.

> Also, if your computer fan is bogged down with dust, it will not perform optimally.

Mouse

Optical mice are easy to clean simply with a disinfectant wipe. If you happen to have an older ball or other mechanical style mouse, throw it away and buy an optical mouse. (Seriously. Do it.)

Screen

Your computer screen attracts dust, like most electronics. Using a Swiffer or other brand electrostatic dusting cloth easily remedies this. If you have it handier, you can even use a cleaning cloth for glasses as it is non-abrasive. Spray cleaners are available for LCD screens at your favorite variety store, if you are so inclined.

Computer

The nemesis of a computer system is heat. Lack of ventilation can ruin power supplies and drives easily. Also, if your desktop computer fan is bogged down with dust, it will not perform optimally. While your computer is off and unplugged, take the outer case off if you are brave enough. Be careful not to touch any of the insides; also ground yourself to the case to avoid static electricity discharge destroying a component. First wipe out the big dust bunnies from the bottom of the case so that you avoid scattering dust back into the electronics. If you have a computer vacuum or even a regular vacuum with a small plastic (not metal) nozzle, use it to pick up most of the other dust. If you still have cleaning to do, you can use canned air carefully, avoiding stirring up more dust into other parts.

If you do not feel brave enough to open up your case, at least wipe dust off the outside, paying special attention to the vents in the case. Regulation of temperature depends on airflow through these vents, and clogs can cause your machine to heat up and can damage components.

No spring cleaning would be complete without the aesthetic touch: Akin to bringing fresh flowers into the kitchen table, how about changing the background on your desktop?!

At least it's easier than moving furniture.

Since 1997, Jen Sharp (JenSharp.com) has served business and government across Kansas and the US and even internationally, specializing in Web development, design & programming including e-Learning, ecommerce, content management systems, and other small business solutions.