Computer Corner

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This feature of *The Kansas Lifeline* will address a handful of frequently asked computer questions in each edition. Readers are invited to e-mail questions to krwa@krwa.net to be answered in future articles.

Q: I've noticed some laptop users have these little folding stands that raise their computers just and inch or so from the surface the laptop sits on. What is the purpose of this and is it something I should use with my laptop?

Yes, it is a good idea. After all, a laptop is no small investment and they are usually subjected to a lot of punishment. Heat has long been known as an enemy of virtually all delicate electronic circuits. Good airflow to help keep computer electronics cool while in use just may lengthen the computer's lifespan. Laptop and notebook computers do the work of their larger, more stationary cousins, but they have to do it in a tiny, lightweight, portable version. While a desktop computer may have as many as five or more cooling fans inside and various vents on the front, sides and/or back of the machine to allow for ventilation, laptops don't have that luxury because of the space constraints. Laptops need ventilation too, but design limitations in making a portable computer result in fewer fans and vents commonly on the back and on the bottom. While designers of laptops may include little feet that hold the bottom up above a solid surface by a fraction of an inch, persons wanting to maximize the airflow available to their computer may wish to purchase a portable stand to give a little more distance between surface and vent. This is especially important for those that find themselves placing their laptops on surfaces like, for example, tables at a convention that are draped in a cloth that may impede the little bit of air space between table and vent or worse yet, placing the computer on a lap. You now understand why the computer feels really hot?

Q: I took a group of photos with my digital camera that were very important pictures. They were saved on memory card. One of my kids, without asking of course, decided they wanted to download some nonsense from the Internet and wrote over my photos. Are they gone forever?

First, if data is important, one should really make sure that it exists in more than one place. Important data can be backed up to a DVD, CDR, a USB thumb drive, also known as a flash drive, or some other choice of backup media. Even with perfectly behaved children, problems retrieving data may occur.

As for the present situation, just because data has been deleted does not mean it is gone forever. When a file is simply deleted what actually takes place is the computer index of storage locations of data, called the FAT table (file allocation table), is altered to indicate that the data storage area is now available for reuse. However, if no new data is ordered to be written into this area, then the 'deleted' data can be rather easily retrieved using a variety of software tools available on the market. But, if other data is saved that overwrites the same physical data storage space, attempts to retrieve the data are almost always unsuccessful.

There are data recovery companies that charge a pretty penny to make an attempt at restoring your lost data products. They make no guarantees and they usually require payment up front. If you are a 'do it yourselfer' there are software packages available that can be used to retrieve data. But remember, there are no guarantees.

By the way, keep a close eye on the kids and their Internet activities. If parents don't follow children's Internet use, losing a few important photos for something they are downloading without your knowledge might be the least of a parent's worries.

Q: If my computer screen freezes up, what should I do?

First, before assuming the computer has locked up make sure you are addressing the window that is in the forefront and is actually active. Just because selection buttons and fields contained in a window may be visible doesn't mean those selections are necessarily available at that moment. There may be another window in front that requires being closed before the window wanted will respond.

Naturally, it is important to make sure that the mouse and/or keyboard are plugged in. If the problem is related to typing numbers it is essential that the "numbers lock" be turned on.

Next, determine if the problem is isolated to a lack of mouse response. To test this, use one of the keyboard equivalent commands, i.e., one the commands listed on the menu that has one of its letters underlined or highlighted. Make this selection by pressing that letter on the keyboard while simultaneously hitting the Alt key.

If there is still no response, choose the "Windows" key on the keyboard. This is the one with the Windows symbol, located to the left of the left Alt key. If the computer is able to respond, the Windows menu will pop up. Then the arrow keys located at the lower right of the keyboard may be used to navigate to the selection for shut down. Make the selection to shutdown the computer with the keyboard.

If choosing the Windows key from the keyboard doesn't provide a response don't resort to simply turning off the computer. First one will want to attempt a 'warm boot.' This means restarting the computer without actually turning it off. Turning the system off is referred to as a 'cold boot.' In earlier versions of Windows, the user would press the Control, Alt and Delete keys simultaneously, whereas with more recent versions, using the Control, Shift and Escape keys will reboot.

If the computer responds, the Windows 'Task Manager' should appear with a choice for 'End Task.' This may need to be picked several times before the computer reboots depending how many tasks are active. One may be able to end a specific task by selecting the offending program causing the problem, usually identified by a message stating "…program is unresponsive…" Highlighting this program and choosing "End Task" may make it unnecessary to reboot the entire system.

If none of these things happen, and if the computer in question has a reset button, use that rather than hitting the power button. Turning the computer off via the power button is a last choice. Doing so will most likely contribute to damaged files on your hard drive due to improper shut down of the Windows Operating System.

When the computer is restarted, a warning message will appear indicating that files may be damaged or corrupt on the hard drive and a repair utility needs to be run. Allow this repair utility to complete. Interrupting it before it completes will cause the same warning each time the computer is restarted until it is allowed to complete normally.