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## Keep your data safe

Computer security is now big news. Most PC users worry about the possibility of viral infection and how to store sensitive information away from prying eyes. Chris Cain provides a guide to digital protection

While most of us are brought up with the idea that sharing is good, we all know there are times when it pays to keep things to yourself. After all, what would your colleagues say if they knew what your salary really is?

There are many reasons for making things secure and keeping details tucked away on your PC can certainly help. However, the fact that something is stored on your computer does not mean it's safe.

Unless you take steps to prevent general access, any number of people could be peeking at your private files.

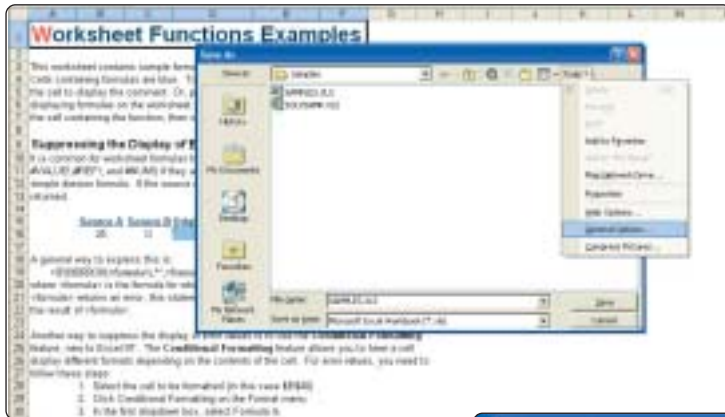
Along with sneaky staff there are internet hackers constantly looking for unprotected machines, waiting to see what information they can get their grubby hands on.

With the increase in always-on broadband internet connections this is a very real problem – especially if you keep bank account or other personal details on your system.

Another threat comes from computer viruses bent on destroying your data or, perhaps worse, sharing it with everyone in your email address book. Often spread unwittingly by email, the rise in these viruses is phenomenal and unless your

## Open sesame

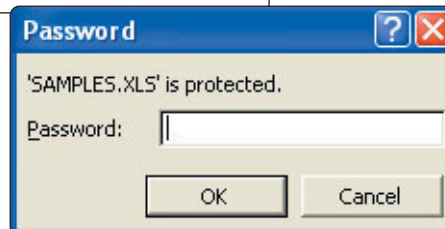
**M**icrosoft Office lets you protect important data by assigning passwords to documents. In this example we're using Excel, but the same process applies to other applications in the suite.



**1** With your document ready, choose Save As from the File menu and select General Options in the drop-down Tools menu. In Word or PowerPoint you'll need to select Security Options



**2** Type your chosen password into the space provided – as you type the letters will appear as a row of asterisks. You can have different passwords for viewing and modifying if you prefer. Now click ok and save the document



**3** The next time your document is loaded Microsoft Office will ask you for your password. Job done

PC's antivirus shots are up to date, you're pretty much a sitting duck. The good news, however, is that it's not difficult to stay ahead of the game. In this workshop we run through some of the options and show you ways to keep your data safe.

### What's the password?

Perhaps the most classic form of protection – adding passwords to important files – is still one of the quickest ways to keep unwanted noses out. If you don't know the secret keyword, you can't open the file – it's that simple.

Microsoft Office is used for any number of important business and personal documents, so it's no surprise that there are password-protection options for files created in Word, Excel and even PowerPoint. To find out just how easy and effective this is, see *Open sesame* above.

Of course, you may want to protect other types of files with passwords. One solution is to use something like WinZip ([www.winzip.com](http://www.winzip.com)) which lets you store important data in a password-protected archive. This has the added benefit of saving on hard disk space because it also compresses files.

Note that Windows XP can see and open ZIP files as normal folders but, even though it will let you see the files inside a protected archive, without the password you can't actually do anything with them. This kind of protection isn't going to stop a hardened hacker but it will certainly put off casual snoopers.

Other programs like shareware application PPSLite ([www.necrocosm.com/ppslite.htm](http://www.necrocosm.com/ppslite.htm), or load it up from our cover disc) let you add a password to EXE files, stopping unauthorised access to programs.

In addition, you can use passwords to prevent casual use of your machine. Most systems allow you to set an option in the Bios chip to ask for a password on power-up, instantly stopping anyone in their tracks. The method varies from one PC to another but in general it's very effective.

On a final note, Windows lets you configure password protection for each user account and XP lets you block access to folders on shared systems. Note that folder passwords can only be used if the drive is formatted with NTFS (the NT filing system) and not the old FAT32 system. You can also set a password

in many screensavers to keep out prying eyes while you are away from your desk.

### Prevention is better than cure

Most of us would be upset if we lost our work to a nasty virus. There's also the risk of spreading the disease and the potential ramifications here are enormous. Installing antivirus software has never been more important and it's an absolute must if you hook up to the internet or share files with anyone – which means the majority of us.

Fortunately, obtaining good virus protection is relatively simple. Packages such as Norton AntiVirus ([www.symantec.co.uk](http://www.symantec.co.uk)), BitDefender ([www.bitdefender.com](http://www.bitdefender.com)) and McAfee VirusScan ([www.mcafee.com](http://www.mcafee.com)) can provide excellent defences for under £50. See our cover disc for links to these packages.

Given the potential cost of damages you'd be a fool not to equip your system with one – antivirus software should be compulsory. Good packages offer regular updates via the web and some can even spot potential viruses they don't know about just by monitoring the behaviour of certain files.

Many antivirus programs come as part of a complete internet security package which may also include a firewall. An essential tool for protection against unwanted intrusion, firewalls keep internet hackers out by monitoring the flow of data to and from your PC. You can choose exactly which programs on your system can access the net to make sure only the information you want to share is allowed out and only data you trust comes in.

In general, firewalls are much easier to set up than you think and while there are some good commercial packages, such as Norton Firewall, you can get basic protection such as ZoneAlarm for free ([www.zonelabs.com](http://www.zonelabs.com)).

This firewall not only stops hackers from snooping but also monitors internet scripts, alerts you if anyone tries to get your data and provides basic email protection by filtering out some potentially harmful attachments. Windows XP has its own firewall built in (see *Firewall and forget*, opposite).

Commercial firewalls frequently offer additional features, such as the ability to try and track the identity of the system attempting access to your machine, but in our experience we really can't recommend ZoneAlarm highly enough.

## Online storage

As well as simply making backups of important files (come on, when was the last time you did that?) another way to keep data secure is to store it offsite. Even better, you can keep prized files away from your system by storing them online.

Fortunately, you don't need to employ the services of an expensive data warehousing company. If you only want to store a few files, how about using a free email service such as Hotmail?

While you can't store too much here, Hotmail is great for keeping a spare copy of, say, your latest list of contact names and addresses. Simply email this as a message or an attachment to your Hotmail account from another email address, or

create a new Hotmail message and keep it in your Drafts folder.

If you've registered your own domain name for a website, you may also have an amount of web storage space included which could be used to house crucial files. Another option, and one that's increasingly popular, is to employ a commercial online storage system, such as Xdrive ([www.xdrive.com](http://www.xdrive.com)).

For a small subscription fee this adds a virtual drive to Windows Explorer which can be used to store data securely offsite. Ordering and setup are simple and you can even save straight to Xdrive from inside applications. The size of the drive is governed by the fee, starting at \$4.95 (approx £3) per month for 75MB. You can try the service free for 15 days – see the cover disc link for more information.

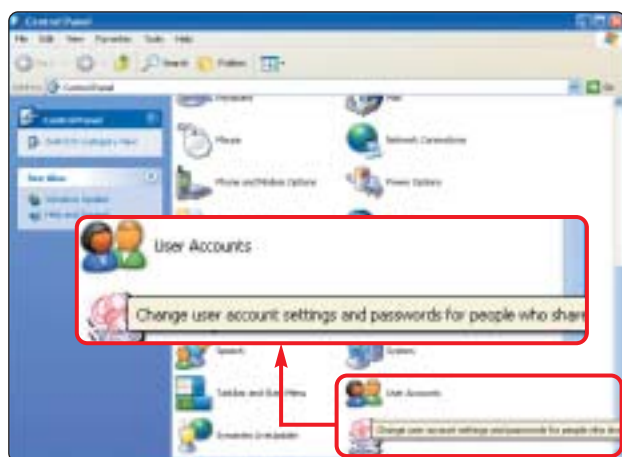
## Encryption

Should your data be extremely sensitive you may want to encrypt it to ensure complete secrecy. The idea here is even

## Windows XP user accounts

**T**hough simple, creating a logon password for your Windows user account is a good way to prevent unauthorised access to your data. However, before doing so it is important to note that creating a password for an existing account will lose all encrypted files, personal certificates and stored passwords for websites and network resources related to it.

The same thing will happen if the password is changed. If you don't have any of these attached to the account that's fine. If you do have some you can't lose, or are in any doubt, leave this feature alone.



- 1 From the Start menu, call up Control Panel and find the User Accounts icon. Double-click this to bring up the settings options



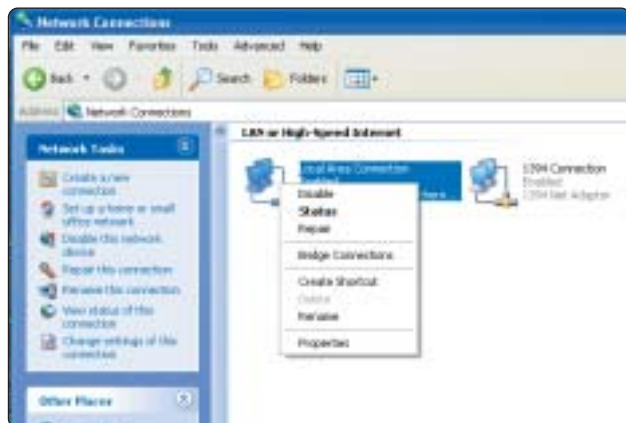
- 2 Select the account you want from the list presented and then choose Create a password



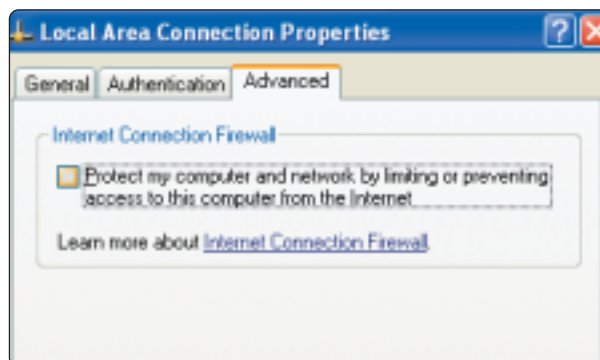
- 3 Note the warnings about existing settings that will be lost. If you wish to proceed, enter the requested details and click Create Password. The next time you log on you will be prompted for the password

## Firewall and forget

**A** must for those with an always-on connection, firewalls help keep internet intruders at bay. Windows XP has a basic firewall built in and this can easily be engaged to provide basic protection. However, third-party firewalls, such as ZoneAlarm, offer far more customisation options.



**1** To switch on the firewall in XP, go to Start, Control Panel and select Network Connections. Right-click on the internet connection you wish to protect with a firewall and then select Properties



**2** Select the Advanced tab at the top and tick the box in Internet Connection Firewall. Your PC is now protected – it's as simple as that



**1** The level of protection from the ZoneAlarm firewall can be adjusted easily. Here, internet protection is at maximum but computers in the Trusted Zone (on a local network, for example) are allowed to access shared resources



**2** ZoneAlarm allows far greater control of which programs can access the internet. You can specify whether applications have access to trusted network and internet zones and whether they can perform server-type operations (send and receive data). Access is configured by clicking the boxes

if files fall into the wrong hands, such as those of a competitive company, shifty hacker or nosy boss, the information they contain can't be accessed. Even looking at a raw data listing won't reveal anything as the contents are scrambled unless you have the key to unlock them.

Microsoft has included encryption technology in XP Professional for both standard files and emails. Encrypted files can only be opened by a particular user. If you share your PC, others will be able to see the names of these files but they won't be able to access them.

With emails, things get a little more complicated. To send encrypted messages via Outlook or Outlook Express using XP's encryption, you need to have a valid, Microsoft-approved digital signature certificate. A digital signature allows the recipient to verify the source of the email, to prove who it is from and that it hasn't been tampered with.

At the same time, the recipient must also have their own digital signature to confirm their identity. Only when you've swapped digital signatures with people can you send them encrypted messages.

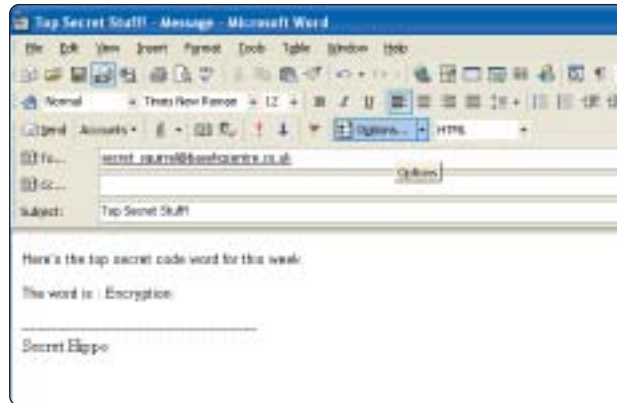
See *Sending an encrypted message in Outlook 2002* on page 116 for our step-by-step guide on how to do this.

To get an approved certificate you can either pay a company such as VeriSign, or apply for a free one from a company such as Thawte.com. This is just a matter of following simple online instructions and entering some key information about yourself.

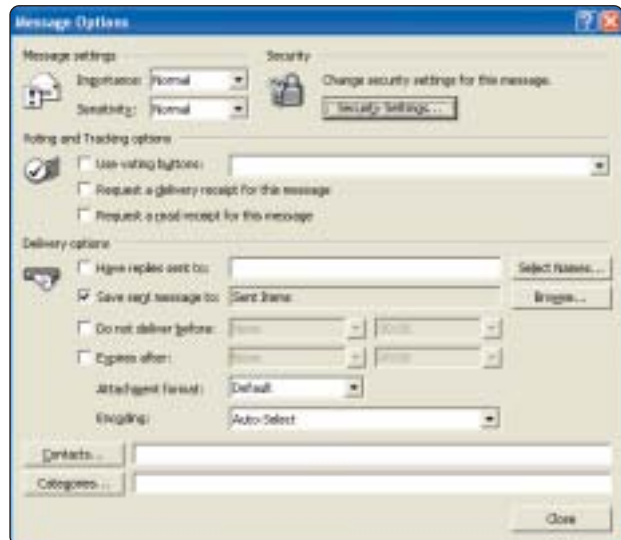
If you don't use XP Professional or a Microsoft email client, another way to encrypt messages is to use the popular PGP (Pretty Good Protection)

## Sending an encrypted message in Outlook 2002

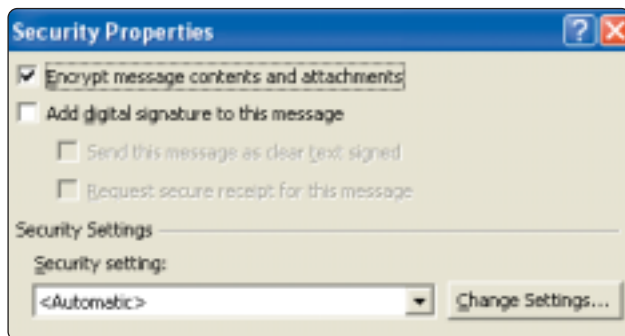
Once you've applied for and received a Microsoft-approved digital signature, sending an encrypted email message is easy. However, remember that you can only send encrypted messages to someone who has sent you their digital signature.



**1** The first step is to prepare your message. Once you've finished composing it, select the Options button



**2** The Message Options box will now appear. Edit any options here you wish. To access the encryption setup page, click the Security Settings box



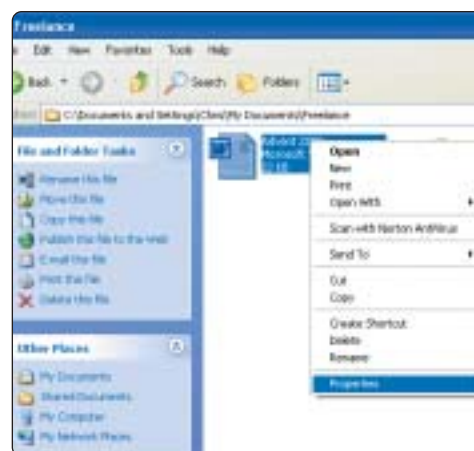
**3** Now select Encrypt message contents and attachments and click ok

software ([www.pgpeurope.com](http://www.pgpeurope.com)). The basic version for encrypting email attachments is free (personal version €39 or £26.66) and can be downloaded from the website or loaded up from our cover disc. You can also buy Personal and Enterprise versions to encrypt files and even instant messaging conversations.

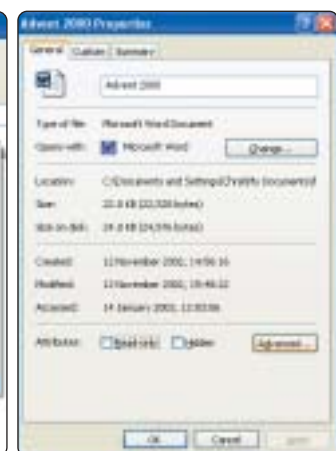
### Safe and sound

Following any or all of these tips will go some way towards keeping your data secure. If there's one thing we can't stress enough, though, it's the importance of installing decent antivirus software as this works more or less by itself. A firewall is also a must if you use the internet for extended periods of time. Although no security measure is 100 percent assured, this will at least take care of many external threats to your data. ■

## Encrypting a file with Windows XP Professional



**1** To encrypt an item using Windows XP's built-in tools, right-click a file or folder icon and choose Properties



**2** Now select the Advanced tab at the top, and check 'Encrypt contents to secure data'. It's that easy