

Work faster

not harder

For devices designed to aid productivity, PCs waste a lot of our time. Cumbersome click-through menus, frustrating software features and fiddly photo transfers cumulatively eat up valuable minutes. Scott Dunn's, Woody Leonhard's and Michael Desmond's expert tips will help you claw back hours

As the backbone of your office setup, the PC can perform a dizzying array of tasks that should make your working day pretty efficient. But the very fact that it's so readily able to turn itself to almost any task means you can spend considerable time searching for the files and applications you need, not to mention switching between them. To get the most from your PC you need to define what and how it runs your installed hardware and software rather than let Windows or the packages you use under it run away with you.

We asked experts in three of the most crucial and commonly used areas - Windows, hardware and Microsoft Office - to provide their takes on setting up your system to operate in a streamlined manner. Once you have cut down on extraneous clicks and waiting times, you will be able to optimise the time you spend in front of your computer screen.

Over the following pages we'll give you tips on finding your files more easily, minimising the interference of less important apps and tasks running in the background, as well as speeding up bootup and shutdown times. Plus, you'll find at-a-glance lists of the most helpful keyboard shortcuts so you can achieve that little bit more from your average working day.

Windows

Automate maintenance

Regular disk maintenance will keep your system running at its best, while making Windows clean up after itself will aid your efficiency. In Windows 98 and Me choose Start, Programs, Accessories, System Tools, Maintenance Wizard. Follow the prompts to make ScanDisk, Disk Defragmenter and Disk Space Manager run automatically at a scheduled time. The Custom option on the opening screen lets you disable some startup apps as well.

In other Windows versions you must manually add utilities to the Scheduled Tasks folder. Choose Start, Programs (All Programs in XP), Accessories, System Tools, Scheduled Tasks. Double-click the Add Scheduled Task icon and let the wizard guide you through automating your chosen utility. Repeat for each tool you want.

Hibernate to accelerate

Shutting down your PC after use saves energy but not time. Get it to hibernate instead and Windows won't need to exit and restart between sessions. When you need the PC again it quickly restores any applications you were running.

Most but not all PCs can hibernate - Windows 9x PCs with FAT32 hard drives, for example, can't. To check in Windows 2000 and XP, log on as the administrator. In the Address bar of any folder or Internet Explorer window, type 'Control Panel\Power Options' (Control Panel\Power Management for Windows 98) and press Enter. If a Hibernate tab appears, click the Disk Space for Hibernation dialog box. If your system meets the hardware requirements, you're in luck. Tick the Enable Hibernation box and make sure you don't get any error messages. The next time you choose Start, Shutdown (in Windows 98, Me or 2000), when given the option select Hibernate.

In Windows XP choose Start, Turn Off Computer and press Shift to transform the Standby button into the Hibernate button. Unlike hibernation, standby doesn't completely shut down your system. It's a lower power mode that's useful when you'll be away from your PC for a while.

Lightweight logons

Reducing the number of applications that launch when starting up your user account is another way to preserve your patience. To do this effectively, try the freeware app Startup Control Panel

(available at www.mlin.net/startupcpl.shtml). Browse the tabs, deselect unneeded items and experiment until your PC starts up with only the apps you want.

Explorer made to order

Rather than launching and closing Windows Explorer time and again to

hunt for elusive folders, create custom shortcuts to those you use the most often. Right-click a folder, choose Create Shortcut and then specify any attributes you find helpful such as displaying the file tree pane.

Mouse mastery

Moving a slow cursor all around the screen can be a drag. In the address bar of any folder or Internet Explorer window, type 'Control Panel\Mouse' and press Enter to go to the rodent's Control Panel.

The tab you click depends on your mouse driver but may be named Pointer Options or Motion. Look for a control to adjust the pointer speed. Drag the slider towards Fast if getting the pointer to its destination takes too much effort. Move the slider back toward Slow if you find you're losing accuracy.

Many mice also support an option for moving the pointer disproportionately further as you drag the mouse faster. To activate this feature, look for an acceleration setting. You may have to click an Advanced or an Accelerate button to see it. For some mouse drivers this feature is named Enhance Pointer Precision. Check this option (if applicable) and pick a sensitivity level that suits.

Set dialog box defaults

Another way to access regularly used folders and files quickly is to set application shortcuts so that they default to the folder you

require. Click through the Start menu or find the shortcut you want in the Quick Launch toolbar. Right-click its icon and choose Properties. In the Start In box, type the path where you keep most of your work files (the folder you'll most want to see when you open a file dialog box) then press ok.

You may need to use different steps for Office apps. In Word and Excel, for example, choose Tools, Options. If you're using Word you'll then need to click the File Locations tab, select a file type and use the Modify button to adjust the path. Repeat this process for each file type you want to customise. In Excel, click the General tab and edit the path listed for Default file location.

Speedier searching

If you regularly search for files in the same few destinations, it's a good idea to make the process more efficient by saving the parameters you use most frequently.

At the desktop or in any folder window, press F3 to start your search. Enter your settings including wildcard characters if desired - for example, *.mp3 to look for music files. Click Search or Find Now to engage your settings (you can click Stop at any time) then choose File, Save Search.

Windows 98 saves an icon for these settings on the desktop. Later versions of Windows let you specify where to put the icon. Either way, you can move it to a convenient place (such as the Start menu). Just

double-click the icon any time you need to perform that exact process in the future. If the saved search request has all the parameters you want, start it simply by pressing Enter immediately after the Search or Find window opens.

Resize toolbars with a touch

To get the optimum fit for all toolbars on the Taskbar (Quick Launch and so on), double-click the divider bar to the left of each toolbar. It will now instantly resize to show all the icons. You may need to double-click the same divider a couple of times to cycle through the possible arrangements. This tip also works for toolbars that share space on the same line of any folder or Internet Explorer window. In Windows XP you may first have to right-click the Taskbar or toolbar and then deselect Lock the Taskbar or Lock the Toolbars before resizing.

Deal with details

Explorer can be set to display files in Details view (select View, Details). The problem is that messing about with the width of columns for size, file type, data and so on takes too long. Don't do it. Press Ctrl and the plus key on the numeric keypad to instantly resize all columns to the best fit. To adjust a single column, double-click the divider line to the right of its heading.

Hardware
Speed up CD burns

A CD rewriter lets you back up files, make your own audio CDs and even produce video discs for playback on many DVD players. But if you're working with an old drive, you're wasting a lot of time. An old 12-speed CD-RW drive takes seven minutes 10 seconds to burn a 650MB disc. A newer 48-speed model can do the job in two minutes 37 seconds. An outstanding timesaver.

Bullet-speed bootups

To get your hardware in shape, shave redundant tasks from the bootup process. Start the PC and, while it's booting up, press the key (indicated onscreen) that launches the PC Setup program. It's often the Delete key but your system may specify otherwise. Start by bypassing the system memory check, which is the part of the Post (power on self test) routine that counts the RAM in your PC. Go to the Boot area and look for a setting called Set Quick Post or the like. Change it to Enabled.

To prevent your PC from looking for and spinning the floppy drive, remove the floppy disk from the top of your boot drive list. In the Boot section look for an area called Set Boot Device Order or something similar. Use the keyboard arrow keys to select the IDE Hard Drive entry and promote it to the top of the list by pressing Shift, +. If you want to boot from a floppy disk later, you can always restore it to the top of the list.

Exit and save your settings (many systems tell you to press F10 for this). The boot process will then resume. If you encounter any problems, simply re-enter your PC Setup program and retrace your steps to return to the original configuration.

Weather blackouts with a UPS

Electrical fluctuations can play havoc with your data. Get a UPS (uninterruptible power supply) to protect against this. If the power goes out the battery in one of these breadbox-sized units will kick in and keep your PC going. With about 15 minutes of offline juice on tap you can save all your work before shutting down. This saves you spending ages trying to recover partially saved files or redoing work that's been lost due to a power failure.

Put quick access at your fingertips

Every other website seems to want you to log in, but searching through a long list of passwords is a nuisance. Use a USB fingerprint scanner (costing around £100) and you can cut out the need for password-protection because it will then be safe to use an automatic password logon. Enter the passwords once. When the fingerprint scanner recognises you, it can be set to retrieve and send the passwords needed to enter commonly accessed secure websites. Some scanners store fingerprint and authentication data on the device itself rather than on the PC's hard drive, meaning you can carry it around with you and log on to websites from remote locations. Very slick and very quick.

Boost disk performance with Raid

In a world of gigahertz processors and quadruple-data-rate memory, hard disks are a huge bottleneck. One solution is to install two hard drives as a Raid (redundant array of independent disks) configuration. Raid controllers use a process called disk striping to spread files across multiple drives, resulting in higher data-transfer rates.

A Raid setup can shave up to 40 percent off the time needed to complete a 1.3GB file transfer, depending on the drive model. But other operations, such as finding a file in Windows, run slightly slower.

To make Raid work you'll probably need an add-in card (some newer PCs have built-in Raid functionality) and a pair of identical hard drives. You may also need to set jumpers on the drives and on the Raid controller card or motherboard. Once installed, a pair of 80GB drives will appear in Windows Explorer as a single 160GB drive.

While adding a second drive may increase the odds of a disk failure simply because you've added another disk

Keyboard corner

Operation

Open or close the Start menu

Switch back to a running program

Switch to another running program

Open My Computer (Windows Explorer)

Move to the current folder's parent folder in Explorer

Rename selected folder or file on the desktop in an Explorer window or dialog box

Search for a file in Explorer

Search for a file in a new window

Minimise all open windows (press again to restore them)

Open the Run dialog box

Open the current window's Control menu

Key combination

Ctrl, Esc or Windows

Alt, Tab

Hold Alt and press Tab repeatedly

Windows, E

Backspace

F2

Ctrl, F or F3

Windows, F

Windows, D

Windows, R

Alt, spacebar



Sony's FIU-600 fingerprint scanner retrieves and sends passwords needed to enter websites

that could fail, today's drives are reliable enough that mainstream PC makers are adopting Raid in their systems. A sensible data backup routine should ensure that you don't lose critical information.

More monitors means more workspace

Multitaskers who have several applications open simultaneously – a couple of Word documents, an Excel spreadsheet, a web page or three and an email app – should consider adding a second screen. This may turn out to be the single most useful hardware approach to boosting your productivity as it saves flicking between active windows.

Many graphics cards now offer dual outputs and side-by-side displays that are a cinch to set up. Plug an extra monitor into the second output and use the graphics card's software (generally found in the Windows Display Properties dialog box) to activate the second screen.

Just make sure that you've matched your graphics card and monitors. One screen can use the standard VGA port while the other can be hooked up via DVI – ideal if you have both a CRT and a flat-panel screen at your disposal.

Keyboard corner

Operation	Key combination
In all Office applications	
Launch spellchecker	F7
Open Save As dialog box	F12
In Word	
Return to default formatting	Ctrl, Space
Add or remove one-line space above current or selected paragraphs	Ctrl, 0
Single-space current or selected paragraphs	Ctrl, 1
Double-space current or selected paragraphs	Ctrl, 2
Set current or selected paragraphs to 1.5-line spaces	Ctrl, 5
Left-align current or selected paragraphs	Ctrl, L
Centre current or selected paragraphs	Ctrl, E
Right-align current or selected paragraphs	Ctrl, R
Justify current or selected paragraphs	Ctrl, J
Insert date	Alt, Shift, D
Insert time	Alt, Shift, T
In Excel	
Recalculate sheets in open workbooks	F9
Copy formula of cell above	Ctrl, '
Copy value of cell above	Ctrl, Shift, '
Open Format Cells dialog box	Ctrl, 1
Insert date	Ctrl, ;
Insert time	Ctrl, Shift, ;
Select current column	Ctrl, Space
Select current row	Shift, Space

Autofeed pages to be scanned

Automatic document feeders can be a huge help if you regularly scan lengthy documents. Built into the top of the scanner, the feeder acts like the paper tray of a printer, placing a new document or photo on the glass after the current scan is finished. Pair it with scanning software that intelligently names each image and you have truly hands-free scanning. Just be ready to clear the occasional paper jam.

Document feeders aren't cheap and significantly bump up the cost of a new scanner, but you should be able to find a compatible feeder as an upgrade for £150 or so. And it should quickly pay for itself in terms of time saved through not feeding your scanner by hand.

Skip serial ATA for now

Serial ATA's 150MBps (megabytes per second) data rate is slightly higher than that of widely deployed 133MBps ATA-133 drives. But no mainstream drive comes close to flooding even an older ATA-100 connection. The bottleneck is in the disk heads and platters. Serial ATA offers a more compact, manageable and flexible connection between the drive and the controller. But from a timesaving standpoint you'll never recoup the effort you expend installing a Serial ATA card.

Office

Get the latest version

Whether you run Office 2003, XP, 2000 or even Office 97, you'll avoid lots of frustration and hassle by making sure you have the latest versions of your paid-for programs. Office updates rarely include any nifty timesaving features, but many patch hundreds or thousands of bugs that can crash your system.

Office 2003, XP and 2000 users should visit <http://office.microsoft.com/officeupdate/default.aspx> for information about useful updates. To get the latest update for your version of Office, single-click the Check for Updates link then follow the instructions and download the scanner if need be. Select the updates you require and then

choose Start Installation. Office 97 users should go to www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?familyid=befd7842-602e-42b0-89d2-6be39f1167c1&displaylang=en to update to version SR-2b.

Make icons work for you

Take control of the standard toolbars in all Office apps by clicking Tools, Customize, Commands. Make sure the Save in box says Normal.dot so your changed toolbar will appear in any normal document. To add an icon to a toolbar find the one that you want in the Categories and Commands lists and drag the command on to the desired toolbar. Similarly, you can delete any unwanted tools from the toolbar to save clutter and confusion.

Add folders to the Places Bar

When you open a file in Office or save a newly created document you come face-to-face with the Places Bar: the strip of large icons that runs down the lefthand side of the Open and Save As dialog boxes. Customise this tab with your own icons to quickly drill down to the most commonly used folders.

In Office 2003 or XP, click File, Open. Right-click on the Places Bar and choose Small Icons. That gives you room for 10 icons. Navigate to a folder that you want to appear in the Places Bar and select it. In the upper righthand corner of the dialog box select Tools, Add to My Places. Having got the icons you want in place you can reorder them to suit.

Office 2000 doesn't let you use small icons and none of the versions of Office allows you to delete the five default icons. To perform those operations use a tool like the WOPR Places Bar Customizer which costs \$15 (approx £9) from www.wopr.com.

Excise automatic hyperlinks

Automatic hyperlinks can be a real bugbear. Every time you click on a web page or email address embedded in a document Office tries to take you to that page. Want to end this not-so-helpful feature?

In Office 2003 or XP, if you're quick enough, you can click the Smart Tag that appears immediately after the address or URL gets converted to a hyperlink. Then all you need to do is choose Stop Automatically Creating Hyperlinks. The application will comply but you'll have to repeat the action in Word, Excel and PowerPoint.

Alternatively, in each application of any version of Office, click Tools, AutoCorrect (or AutoCorrect Options), AutoFormat As You Type. Then simply deselect the box that's marked 'Internet and network paths with hyperlinks'.

Show paragraph marks and tabs in Word

Collectively, Word users lose thousands of hours every day because their paragraphs don't line up properly, bullet-points suddenly appear, the text turns bold or some other odd piece of formatting crops up in an otherwise normal document. All such formatting sits inside paragraph marks that hide within the document. Whenever you copy, move or delete a paragraph mark, Word propagates formatting in ways that are inscrutable if you can't see the paragraph marks.

Word has an icon on its standard toolbar that looks like a backward 'P'. Click that icon to see what the utility is up to. As well as paragraph and tab marks, Word insists on putting tiny irritating dots wherever there are character spaces. Though this helps you spot double spaces, they can become overwhelming. To make Word show paragraph marks and tabs without driving you batty, click Tools, Options, View and select the Paragraph marks and Tab characters boxes.

Always on the menu

Prevent Office's spring-loaded adaptive menus that conceal infrequently used commands by clicking Tools, Customize, Options. In Office 2003 or XP, check the 'Always show full menus' box. In Office 2000, clear the box marked 'Menus show recently used commands first'.

Take control of attachments

Microsoft has decreed that certain versions of Outlook hide specific kinds of files attached to email messages. But Microsoft doesn't block Word documents or Excel spreadsheets, even though either could contain viruses. Instead, the focus is on programs and other files (such as EXE, COM, VBS, SCR and PIF files) that will run immediately if you double-click them.

For better control over the email attachments you can and can't see, download the free Attachment Options utility (www.slovaktech.com/attachmentoptions.htm). This will force Outlook to show you all the files attached to your incoming emails. ☒

