

Doctors Orders

Welcome

Hello and welcome to the March edition of Doctors Orders. Last month we had an email from a freelance computer engineer from Leeds, who had somehow seen our newsletter and was so impressed he wanted to receive it every month. (So that he can re-badge it and send it to his customers, our boss says) but as the rest of us are not grouchy old pessimists, we took it as a bit of a compliment.

In fact its not easy to get two computer engineers to agree on anything. If you had a pub full of football supporters and a different pub full of computer geeks, you'd still end up with a fight in both. But instead of it starting with "e're... did you spill my pint"? it would be "So you think Firefox is better than Internet Explorer do you, eh, eh"?

March sees the launch of our HomeCare support package for a measly £6.99 a month and a BusinessCare support package for an equally measly £9.99 a month, per PC.

This in combination with our new "Fixed Price On-Site Repair" and we definitely have something to shout about this month.

We are listening to our customers and they are telling us they want fixed prices so they know the cost up front and a friendly voice at the end of the phone, when they are in trouble. Add to this a quick remote fix, if possible and most of our customers would be ecstatically happy. Well, mildly pleased, at least. (Full details on page 5 & 8).

Also in this months edition we have tried to answer the gritty question "Is Windows Vista any good, or is it worth waiting for Windows 7"? We give you the honest answers on the heels of Microsoft dropping Windows XP last month.

Looking at this months edition, it looks a bit devoid of pictures, but don't be put off by all the text, we had such a lot to get in this month, it was either squeeze it into eight pages or end up like a copy of the Sunday Times.

Craig



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Tips for preventing laptop theft

Any police officer can tell you that a few extra steps of caution can avoid a disastrous theft. Thieves enjoy convenience just as any shopper does; if your laptop is more difficult to pinch than the next guy's, it's the next guy who loses.

Mark your laptop

Marking your laptop helps with the recovery of a stolen (or lost) laptop. Either engrave your information onto your laptop or use a tamper-resistant asset tag. After all, the best proof that something is yours is your name right there on the stolen item.

You can use an engraving tool to literally carve your name and contact information on your laptop.

Some clever folks merely write their names inside the laptop, either on the back of some removable door, inside the battery compartment, or other places a thief probably wouldn't think to check. Use a Sharpie or other indelible marker.

You can get asset tags from most print shops. The tags peel and stick like any sticker, but you can't easily remove or damage them.

Don't use an obvious laptop carrying case

That carrying case with the emblazoned Dell logo (or IBM logo, or what have you) isn't just a proud buyer appreciation/marketing gimmick. The custom laptop case tells the casual thief that something valuable lurks inside.

In contrast to a loud-and-proud custom laptop case, a non-descript, soft laptop case doesn't draw undue attention to your computer. Backpacks also make good places to store laptops.

Bad Month for Malware

Several of the biggest software companies have issued fixes this month. So if you are running any software from any of the manufacturers, or software listed below. Go onto their website and download the latest version or update.

Microsoft (as always)

Apple (Safari, Java, X11, Perl, Python)

UltraVNC and TightVNC

Netgear ProSafe SSL VPN Concentrator

Google Chrome Browser

Nokia's PC Suite

Sage Software's ACT contact manager/CRM

Register the laptop and its software

Be sure to send in your laptop's registration card, as well as the registration for any software that you use. If someone steals the laptop, alert the manufacturer and software vendors. Hopefully, they care enough so that if someone using your stolen laptop ever tries to get the system fixed or upgraded, your registration information helps you locate the purloined laptop.

This trick assumes that the person fencing the laptop doesn't fully erase the hard drive.

Be sure to keep a copy of the laptop's serial number and other vital statistics with you, specifically in a place other than the laptop's carrying case. That way, you know which number to report to the police, as well as the manufacturer.

Be mindful of your environment

When you're out and about with your laptop, stay aware of where your computer is and who may have access to it. Watch your laptop!

For example, when dining out, put the laptop in its case beneath the table. If you need to leave the table, either take the laptop with you or ask your friends to keep an eye on it for you.

Be especially mindful of distractions! A commotion in front of you means that the thief is about to take your laptop. A commotion behind you means the thief is in front of you. Thieves work in pairs or groups that way, using the commotion to distract you while they steal your stuff.

The old ball and chain

Your laptop probably comes with a hole or slot into which you can connect a security cable. That hole has an official name — the Universal Security Slot (or USS) sometimes called a Kensington slot.

The USS is designed to be part of the laptop's case. A thief can't remove from the laptop any cable or security device that you thread through the USS; he or she can only cut (or unlock) the cable itself to free the laptop.

Obviously, the USS works best when you have the laptop in a stationary place. Like a bicycle lock, you have to park the laptop by something big and stable, then thread the cable through that big thing and the USS for the lock to work.

The best place to find a security cable for your laptop is in an office supply store.

Some cables come with alarms. You can find alarms that sound when someone cuts the cable, plus alarms that sound when anyone moves the laptop.

Evesham PC owners offered free email support

Owners of Evesham Technology computers who were left stranded when the company collapsed last year have been offered support, from former employees of the PC maker setting up a new company - called Tewktech - to provide customers with warranty support.

Evesham's woes came to light in August 2007 when the PC maker officially declared that it had gone into receivership following several months of speculation. The brand continued trading under the auspices of Geemore Technology. However, an Evesham spokesperson told us early last year that warranties for systems bought before 3 August 2007 were no longer being honoured.

Those left without a warranty were told to turn to a third-party support firm should anything go wrong with their system, with some customers being diverted to Total Care Support, a company owned by Tahir Mohsan, the man behind the Time PC brand who set up the original Evesham rescue package and who himself has recently risen from the ashes after Time went into receivership.

But Tewktech, a Gloucestershire-based company run by former Evesham employee Robin Daunter, is now offering former Evesham customers an alternative. Various support services are available, including a £30-per-hour on-site repair service for residential customers and a £30-plus-postage return-to-base service.

"We believe we are best-placed to offer Evesham customers a solution to any problem they may experience as we are all fully-trained in Evesham products," said Daunter, managing director of Tewktech. "We have maintained excellent relationships with suppliers since Evesham's closure and can source a full range of spares."

Tewktech said it also planned eventually to provide free email support to Evesham customers.

"Tewktech will endeavour to give free email support to any Evesham customer, regardless of the age of the product," said Tewktech technical director Matt Habershon.

Editors note:

Over half of all the I.T. companies that have gone into receivership within the last 5 years, blame their downfall on the cost of providing technical support. As yet there is no substitute for an engineer at the other end of the phone and this is the single biggest cost to manufacturers and repairers alike.

The role of the home PC is so universal these days and users want to do so many different and varied things with their PC, it's not surprising that when things go wrong, users need some help to get things back on the straight and narrow. But if these costs are not factored into the selling price of the PC (and most are not, in the clamber to have the lowest price) it leaves the customer with ineffective support or at best contracted to companies in other countries with cheap labour, such as India.

Full Cover laptop Insurance from just £5 per month

A few of our customers have asked us if we can arrange for accident cover when purchasing a new laptop. It seems that many home contents policies have got wise to the huge costs involved when a laptop is seriously damaged or lost. Many impose an excess of around £150 on any claim, which can be a good slice of the cost of a laptop these days.

We made a few inquiries and couldn't believe the amount of cover you can get for £5 per month.

The best deal we saw was from Supercover Insurance and they are underwritten by AXA and can offer the following for just £5 per month (laptop value up to £1,000).

- Theft
- Accidental damage
- Damage by water or other liquids
- International cover
- Guaranteed 48 Hr replacement

The clincher is the cover for liquid damage which most insurers shy away from and rightly so if you take into account the amount of laptops we see with totally destroyed motherboards after having a drink spilled onto the keyboard.

Accident damage is also common with laptops, a drop from the edge of a tabletop onto a hard floor is usually all that's needed to write-off most laptops.

Laptop crime facts:

- Laptop theft is the fastest growing crime in the UK, growing at 25% per annum.
- Over 20 laptops are stolen every single hour in the UK.
- 90% of stolen laptops are never recovered.

Unfortunately, as laptops get more and more desirable, criminals desire them even more.

We are not immune, we had one stolen from the passenger seat of one of our locked vans. Bang, the side window went and the thief took off like Linford Christie. Our engineer was a few feet away on the drivers side of the van.

We can only provide this cover when you purchase a new laptop from us but if you take out a Care support package at the same time or if you are already registered for HomeCare or BusinessCare, we'll knock £1 of the total monthly cost.

See page 5 for more details of our PC support package or telephone sales **01604 415984** or view details on our website at

www.computerdoctors.uk.net/care

Recover lost disk space by dumping dump files

An obscure function in XP may be consuming huge amounts of free space on your hard disk.

Error "dump" files are supposed to be temporary but sometimes aren't, and the cost can be multiple gigabytes of wasted storage.

Error files leave you down in the UserDumps

The file extension .hdmp is used for uncompressed error dumps, which are files containing diagnostic information designed to help you unravel a problem and trace it back to its source. There's a related file type, .mdmp, that's a compressed version of the same information.

If you set Windows XP to allow error reporting, the .mdmp file is sent to Microsoft for statistical purposes, telling the company which parts of Windows are prone to fracture out here in the real world. The error dump files are normally stored in the C:\Windows\PCHealth\ErrorRep\UserDumps\ folder.

The .hdmp files are plain text, and although they're not formatted for human eyes, you can open them in Notepad to examine their contents. We had a customer's PC in recently which had this problem

Looking at the time stamps of the error dumps, it appeared that the local Wi-Fi connection was getting knocked offline briefly and periodically. (The PC's owner lives in a large block of flats; interference from neighbours' competing Wi-Fi and portable phone setups is a likely cause for the intermittently dropped connections.) As various software would try to use the Wi-Fi connection and fail, XP would generate an error dump.

Curing the unstable Wi-Fi connection is a separate project that usually involves some trial and error in moving the wireless access point, changing the antenna orientation, adjusting the frequency ("channel") that the access point uses, and so on. But that's not our focus here; we're looking to cure the problem of losing hundreds of megs of disk space every day to .hdmp files.

One approach is simply to turn off error reporting. In XP, the switch is located in Control Panel's System applet. To open it, click Start, Run; type sysdm.cpl; and press Enter. Click the Advanced tab, choose the Error Reporting button, select Disable error reporting, and check But notify me when critical errors occur.

What's supposed to happen is that the dump files will still be created — so you can see what went wrong — but the files will be deleted after you dismiss the pop-up error dialog.

Disabling error reporting was worth trying, but doing so didn't help on the PC in question. Something was preventing the system from deleting the dump files. Clearly, sterner measures were required.

The .hdmp and .mdmp files serve no purpose beyond providing a diagnostic trail. Once that purpose is served, the dump files can and should be cleaned out. Built-in system tools such as the Disk Cleanup Wizard are supposed to handle this task. See, for example, KB article 315246, How to Automate the Disk Cleanup Tool in Windows XP. (Vista's cleanup tool is very similar.)

But the cleanup tool on the .hdmp-choked system wouldn't touch these files, even after being instructed explicitly to kill dump files.

Sometimes, expedience trumps elegance. The solution we used was simple and very old-school: a one-line command to silently delete all the UserDump files:

```
DEL /q C:\Windows\PCHealth\ErrorRep\UserDumps\*.*
```

We ultimately created a simple batch file that Task Scheduler could run nightly to clean out that day's accumulation of dump files. This solved the immediate problem of losing disk space while we looked for a long-term solution to the Wi-Fi problem.

I know it seems downright primitive to use command lines and batch files in today's systems, but the plain fact is sometimes the slick automated tools just don't work the way they're supposed to — or the way you want them to. It's good to be able to fall back on simpler methods that you can make do precisely what's needed.

Windows' Help system can tell you more about the DEL command, or you can find the same information at the Command Line Reference. If you need more info on using simple scripts and batch files in today's Windows (including Vista), see Victor Laurie's Command Line in Windows.

But again, the point of this discussion isn't Wi-Fi errors or how to write simple scripts to delete stubborn files. It's to focus on another sinkhole for disk space .

So if you find your hard drive's free space shrinking beyond what you can easily explain, check your UserDumps folder. You just might be in for a surprise!

If all else fails use our old friend "Ccleaner" it gets in the nooks and crannies that other file cleaners fear to tread.

If you don't have it, shame on you. It's a free download from our download page, under the Disk Clean and Tune up heading.

www.computerdoctors.uk.net/pages/links.htm

Low Cost PC support from only £6.99 per month

This month we launch our long awaited support package at a price busting £6.99 per month for domestic users and £9.99 for business users.

Support contracts aren't new but these prices certainly are and we are hoping that they will be popular with our customers.

HomeCare (domestic) customers get the following included in the package for just **£6.99** per month:

- Free access to our dedicated technical support line , (normal cost £1 per minute)
- Technical support personnel to provide help and advice over the telephone for all PC and small network issues
- Provided that you have a suitable internet connection we will also (with your express permission) connect remotely to your computer to assist with the resolution of problems
- You will also get access to our Support Web Site, which will allow you to raise problems out-of-hours, for action on the next working day
- Security pack to protect you from viruses and spyware consisting of three separate award winning programs to use in the event of an attack.
- Optional upgrade to Advanced Security Pack using Kaspersky Internet Security, widely acknowledged as "the best there is" and works without user intervention.
- Five Gigabyte of online data back-up included, to protect all your important data. That's about 15,000 photos or 2,000 songs.
- Remote access to another PC e.g. access your work PC from home.
- A discount of 20% off fixed fee Home Visits & workshop repairs

BusinessCare (Business) customers get the following included in the package for just **£9.99** per month.

- Free access to our dedicated technical support line number, (normal cost £1 per minute) which is available during office hours, Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)
- Technical support personnel to provide help and advice over the telephone for all PC and network issues (Server software not included)
- Provided that you have a suitable internet connection

we will also (with your express permission) connect remotely to your computer to assist with the resolution of problems.

- You will also get access to our Support Web Site, which will allow you to raise problems out-of-hours, for action on the next working day
- Security pack to protect you from viruses and spyware consisting of three separate award winning programs to use in the event of an attack.
- Optional upgrade to Advanced Security Pack using Kaspersky Internet Security, widely acknowledged as "the best there is" and works without user intervention.
- Guaranteed 4 hour response if a support engineer is not immediately available.

The standard security package supplied with all Care Contracts consists of three dedicated programs designed to combat viruses, spyware and file/registry cleanup. These need to be run on a regular basis, say monthly.

If you prefer a more automated approach we can supply Kaspersky Internet Security which normally costs **£48.80** per year and is widely acknowledged as the best security package available.

For just an extra **£2.00** per month, you get all this extra protection.

Essential Protection

Protects from all types of malware and spyware
Scans files, email messages and Internet traffic
Protects instant messengers (ICQ, MSN)
Updates automatically

Extended Protection

Two-way personal firewall
Safe Wi-Fi and VPN connections.
Intrusion prevention system

Preventive Protection

Intelligent application management and control.
Proactive protection from unknown threats
Scans OS and applications for vulnerabilities.
Disables links to malware sites.

Identity Theft Protection

Disables links to phishing websites.
Virtual keyboard for safe entry of logins and passwords.
Prevents theft of data via secure connections
Blocks unauthorized dial-up connections.

Content Filtering

Parental control
Anti-spam protection

For more information call sales on **01604 415984** or see our website.

www.computerdoctors.uk.net/care

What to do about Windows Vista?

Every day, people ask me whether they should order their new PCs with Windows XP or Vista, while others wonder whether they should hold off for Windows 7.

And there are those who are already running Vista and want to know what they can do to overcome its problems.

Making sense of the big Vista muddle

I don't blame people for being confused over Vista. Before it was released, Microsoft hyped Vista, just as the company is currently playing up Vista's successor, Windows 7. When Vista was finally introduced, the press and public reception was generally terrible. Then the Microsoft PR machine chipped in, trying to convince users that Vista was actually the answer to their prayers.

This led to another round of criticism from the press and users. Then the whole cycle was repeated again with the release of Vista Service Pack 1. Finally, Microsoft has totally confused things by switching the focus from Vista to Windows 7, a product that might not even appear until 2010.

At the moment, getting an accurate take on Vista is like trying to form a political opinion by listening to a room full of politicians. You won't end up with a balanced opinion, but you certainly will be totally confused.

Taking a second close look at Vista

I've been as uncertain about Vista as anybody, but last September I had an opportunity to cut through the Gordian knot and clarify the situation for myself.

At that time, I was replacing my aging IBM T42 laptop with the latest IBM T500 model. The T500's standard configuration ships with Vista Home Premium. Normally, I would have requested a downgrade to Windows XP, but I decided instead to try an experiment.

I ordered the laptop stock standard and configured it just as an average user would. I used the machine for three months without attempting any optimization or tweaking. In other words, I was going to experience Vista just like a normal user would.

Now, this may seem unremarkable, but you must understand that for a hard-core techie like me, this was very close to being a traumatic experience.

The mere idea of using Vista left me feeling uneasy. The prospect of using Windows Desktop Search made

me hyperventilate. The possibility of simply having the Windows Sidebar on my desktop sent cold shivers down my spine. And no tweaking? Well, that caused my mouse finger to start twitching uncontrollably in anticipatory frustration.

But I did it. For three months I ran my personal laptop just like a normal user would.

And I'm glad I did it; I now have a clear perspective on Vista.

Vista's interface has big edge over outdated XP

Let me cut straight to the jugular. Overall, Vista is a better operating system than Windows XP and I have no intention of switching back.

As a confirmed XP user, it took me at least a month to come to terms with Vista's interface changes and the fact that many commonly used folders, such as My Documents, had been shifted from their normal locations and often renamed in the process.

However, once the shock of adaptation had passed, I realized that Vista's interface is superior in almost all respects to that of XP. And its folder locations are arranged far more logically.

To me, Windows XP now feels tired and outdated. Going back from Vista to XP is now an experience akin to reverting to Windows 98 after using XP.

And there's more good news: despite Vista's reputation for sluggishness, it runs perfectly fine on modern hardware.

In fact, my new Vista laptop runs noticeably faster than my old laptop that ran XP. And let me assure you, my old laptop was no sluggard.

Now of course, my new laptop might well scream along if I were running XP rather than Vista. It probably would, but it doesn't matter. Vista runs fast enough for my needs, and I'm not prepared to sacrifice the advantages of Vista for a PC that runs faster.

If I played computer games or ran large 3D simulations, I might well have a different viewpoint. Similarly, if I were a mad tweaker I would simply have to run my PC at the fastest possible speed. However, for normal users, Vista runs sufficiently fast on modern hardware that performance is simply not an issue.

If all this is starting to sound like a Microsoft ad, let me put your mind at rest: Vista has some serious downsides, so serious that many XP users will have no wish to convert.

XP retains the compatibility edge over Vista

By far, the most important of these deficiencies is software compatibility. In plain English, it's likely that a considerable number of the programs you are using with XP will not work with Vista and will need to be upgraded or replaced.

On my old XP laptop, I used Adobe Photoshop CS1, but the program wouldn't work with Vista, so I had to pay to upgrade to CS3. The new version is undoubtedly a better product, but I was perfectly happy with the old release. Furthermore, I have yet to use any of the additional features in CS3.

The same applies to Office XP, which wouldn't work with Vista, either. Nor would TextPipe Pro, KeyText, and a half-dozen other software products on my PC. In each case, I was faced with an expensive version upgrade.

My total software upgrade costs were over £400. However, if your PC usage consists of browsing and e-mail, your upgrade cost may be zero. Still, for some folks, the upgrades may be more expensive than the cost of their Vista PC.

It gets worse: you may have to replace your printer, scanner, and other peripherals as well.

In my case, I had to replace my laser printer. There were simply no Vista-compatible drivers available for that particular model. On the other hand, I was reasonably happy to replace my laser printer, as it was nearing the end of its life. You may be less lucky.

What are the other downsides to Vista? Not many of significance, except one: the infamous User Account Control (UAC). (The box that pops up every time you want to make a configuration change)

I'm not going to dwell on UAC; it's been analyzed to death by others. All I will say is that for average users, UAC is an annoyance and can be turned off if you must. To deactivate UAC, click Start, Control Panel, User Accounts and Family Safety (if necessary). Click or double-click User Accounts, select Turn User Account Control on or off, uncheck Use User Account Control (UAC) to protect my computer, and click OK (you may also have to click through some UAC warnings to make the change).

A slightly smarter approach is to disable UAC rather than turn it off altogether. You can find instructions for doing this via the Administrative Tools Control Panel applet in this "InformationWeek" article www.informationweek.com/blog/main/archives/2007/06/dont_shut_off_v.html

However, I recommend that only beginners disable UAC.

Is UAC worth retaining by experienced users who are actually capable of providing informed answers to its incessant questions?

It depends on your level of security risk. If you like to visit Russian hack sites and obtain your software from doubtful sources, then maybe you should leave it. Personally, I disabled UAC and rely instead on the HIPS function in my Online Armor firewall, which provides comparable protection to UAC in a more sensible and comprehensible manner.

(Note: Disabling UAC deactivates Internet Explorer 7's Protected Mode).

Where does Windows 7 fit into the picture?

Before you start believing all the Microsoft hype about Windows 7, let me tell you the truth:

Windows 7 is not so much a new operating system as a development of Vista. Having used the Win7 beta for a while, I've come to appreciate just how much Vista is in Windows 7. Indeed, the best way of thinking of Windows 7 is as Vista Mark 2 or Vista SP3.

This means the major disadvantages of Vista — software and hardware incompatibility — will still be present in Windows 7.

Your XP programs that won't work with Vista still won't work with Windows 7. Indeed, some of the XP programs that do work with Vista may not work with Windows 7. I've already found one and I'm sure there are others.

OK, Windows 7 runs somewhat faster than Vista. But as I've said, with modern hardware Vista's performance is not an issue for most users.

And yes, Microsoft has fixed UAC in Windows 7 by allowing users to adjust the tradeoffs between protection and annoyance using a slider control. Big deal: I'll probably still disable Win7's UAC, just as I have done in Vista.

Windows 7 does hold promise for Vista users currently stuck with hardware that is not up to the task. When these users upgrade to Windows 7, they should see a real performance lift.

But Windows 7 may be a year or more away. Current Vista users with a performance problem may be better off upgrading their hardware now. In fact, a simple memory upgrade to 4GB may be enough to lift Vista's performance to acceptable levels. Memory is cheap, probably cheaper than upgrading to Windows 7.

Tip

Keep an eye on the red light on your tower. Constant flickering when opening or running a program means that your system doesn't have enough RAM memory and the program is moving some of the program files onto the hard drive.

The quickest and easiest remedy is to add more RAM. Most PC's have spare RAM slots and we can match the new RAM with your existing RAM in most cases.

You can check the amount of RAM in use on your system by clicking Ctrl + Alt + Delete keys together and clicking the performance tab. You can make the window smaller by dragging on the bottom right hand corner and keep it on top while you carry on with your work.

Processor usage is the top graph and page file usage is the lower graph. If the page file usage moves from a straight line, you need more RAM.

RAM memory has never been cheaper but the type varies from PC to PC, 1Gb of DDR2 (the most common) costs **£19.37** and we will fit it for free, while you wait, in our workshop.

Fixed Price On-Site Repair

After the success of our fixed price workshop repairs, we have introduced similar pricing for our On-Site service.

At present it's only an option for domestic repairs, but if it proves popular we will introduce it to business repairs as well.

The cost of the fixed price On-Site repair is **£78.30** inc vat plus parts, irrespective how long the engineer is with you.

Plus, if our engineer needs to collect your PC to our workshop, the repair and the cost of returning your PC is all included in the fixed price.

The choice is yours at the time of booking. But we are sure that it will prove popular and give our customers more choices to save money.

If you are a HomeCare customer you get 20% off all On-Site and workshop fixed prices.

We are one of the few companies that actually publish our prices on our website and while we sell our repair services on the quality of our service rather than the price, its good to know that you are getting a good deal as well.

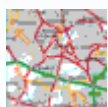
For a full price list see:

www.computerdoctors.uk.net/pages/rates.htm

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www.computerdoctors.uk.net/pages/newsletter.htm



Map to our Northampton Workshop
www.computerdoctors.uk.net/pages/map.htm

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Tel: 0905 121 1097 (9.30-4.30 Mon-Fri)

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