

Doctors Orders

Hello welcome to September, I can't believe we are at the top of the slowly accelerating slide to Christmas and 2011.

I hope you had a good August, mine was a touch eventful.

We had some new strip lights fitted in our workshop this month and because the electrician was a ruddy faced giant of a man and the loft access was impeded by some shop racking, I heard my name echoing through the workshop, just like on the telly when calling someone to the witness stand.

As there was only about a 400mm gap I, for some reason, became the obvious choice to all concerned, to be cajoled through the gap with a length of lighting cable tied to my leg. The reason for this was, a) I would need both hands to crawl through the shallow roof space. b) If the combination of inch thick dust, fibreglass insulation, unbelievable heat and giant spiders got the better of me, Mad-Dog (who is a Kwik-Fit tyre fitter and a customer, who just came in to get his laptop looked at and thought he'd stay for the fun) could rescue me by heaving on the cable.

I managed to get through the loft hatch. It was tight, but some of the helpful suggestions such as "poke him with that broom handle" and "get some of that grease from the garage next door" encouraged me along. Once in the loft, the heat hit me like a solid wall, but I was determined to carry on regardless. With the bosses words ringing in my ears, "Make a good job of this lad and there'll be a drink in it for you".

I crawled slowly towards the other end of the workshop collecting fibreglass insulation about my person as I went. It was only about 12 metres away, but seemed longer.

My only light was one of the engineers battery operated headlamps and I could hear the various creatures scuttling from the light as I turned my head. I could hear the banging and clattering coming from the field behind the workshop where every Wednesday they held a clay pigeon shoot and today was Wednesday.

Somehow I got to the small hole in the ceiling where I had to poke the cable through and started to untie it from my leg.

Suddenly, someone from the field shouted PULL! PULL!

I wasn't really sure what happened next, all I know is that my chin was bouncing across the rafters and I was collecting fibreglass.

I came out of the loft hatch like a cork out of a bottle, missed the steps, but not the shelf racking.

My ball of fibreglass meant only minor abrasions, but what really hurt was the bosses words once again ringing in my ears, "Craig, are you acting the goat again"? And with a shaking of his head, "He'll never amount to anything that lad"!

Craig.

<http://twitter.com/CraigtheTrainee>



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AV suite implicated in 4 minute boot time

An engineer from another local company contacted us with some useful information related to last month's item, "Four minute Boot-Up is easily fixed."

"I installed Trend Micro Internet Security 2010 on some of my clients' computers.

"I noticed significant performance and Web-browsing sluggishness (especially with Vista). Once TMIS 2010 was removed, the performance greatly increased.

"This unpleasant discovery makes me want to get rid of what I once thought was good software.

"Personally I'd recommend ESET's NOD32, as I have been both using it and reselling licenses for it since 2005 and have never had any significant compatibility or performance issues. Their software is written entirely in assembly language instead of the bloated C++ used for Norton and McAfee."

It's nice to know that other IT professionals read our newsletter. AV tools and security suites are notorious system hogs, and feature-bloat is common.

For example, Trend Micro lists 13 major features and sub-systems in its security suite, McAfee lists 14, and Symantec lists 33!

Many of these features duplicate abilities already built into Windows and the major browsers. For example, Internet Explorer and Firefox have built-in link-checkers, pop-up blockers, parental controls, and more. Windows itself (especially Win7) has a capable firewall built in.

So the large security suites are including features you probably already have, and all of these redundant features consume memory and CPU time.

In contrast, the small, more nimble security packages offer just the essentials. For example, ESET lists just six major features for NOD32.

And one of our favourite security tools, Microsoft's free Security Essentials (available from our download page), lists just two major functions: antivirus and anti-malware protection. When used with Windows' built-in firewalls and a fully current browser (say, IE8 or Firefox 3.6.x), you end up with essentially the same capabilities provided by the huge commercial security suites.

What's even better, it's all free!

On any system that's suffering a slowdown, it's well worth the time and trouble to at least temporarily swap out a large commercial security suite with a small and lithe AV tool.

Websites to while away a quiet afternoon.

10 Fun Microsoft Facts You Might Not Know

<http://mashable.com/2010/07/17/microsoft-facts/>

10 Fascinating Facts You Didn't Know About Apple

<http://mashable.com/2010/07/08/10-apple-facts/>

10 Websites for Puzzles, Brain Teasers and Riddles

<http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/10-websites-puzzles-brain-teasers-and-riddles/>

The Top 10 Free Time Wasting Sites on the Net

<http://freebies.about.com/od/710/tp/timewasting.htm>

10 Google Services That Don't Get the Limelight They Deserve

<http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/10-google-services-limelight/>

10 Awesome Webcam Feeds From Around the World

<http://mashable.com/2010/05/05/webcam-feeds/>

Top 10 Tips for Great Pictures

http://www.kodak.com/eknec/PageQuerier.jhtml?pq-path=317&pq-locale=en_US&requestid=40994

10 Top Tips to Save Space on Your Hard Drive (HDD)

<http://mintywhite.com/windows-7/7maintenance/10-top-tips-save-space-hard-drive-hdd/>

10 Great Ways to Jumpstart Your Creativity

<http://www.dumblittleman.com/2008/11/10-great-ways-to-jumpstart-your.html>

Kevin Rose's 10 Tips for Entrepreneurs

<http://www.readwriteweb.com/start/2010/02/kevin-rose-10-tips-for-entrepreneurs.php>

Top 10 Blogs That Will Brighten Your Day

<http://mylifescoop.com/top-10/2010/06/top-10-blogs-that-will-brighten-your-day.html>

Top Ten Lists Of Everything!

<http://www.top10land.com/>

Newsflash!

From 23rd August our basic fixed rate for workshop repairs was reduced to just £65.

See: www.computerdoctors.co.uk/pages/rates_surgery.htm

Flash-spawned 'zombie' cookies (whatever next!)

Way back in a 2008 newsletter, we spotlighted one of the most insidious and least-known features on the Internet: Adobe Flash cookies that were not subject to the usual cookie rules.

Almost two years later, these special Flash cookies are still living in our PCs, and enterprising privacy-busters now use them to create zombie cookies — regular cookies that come back from the dead.

Flash cookies have now landed their manipulators in troubled waters. Last week, two well-known U.S. attorneys, filed a lawsuit in California against Quantcast, a Web page ranking and audience-statistics firm.

They are accused of "setting Flash cookies on their user's computers to use as local storage within the Flash media player to back up browser cookies for the purposes of restoring them later."

The complaint goes on to accuse Quantcast of setting online tracking devices that let them access and disclose personal information. But while the complaint is complex, the technology that spawned it is surprisingly straightforward.

Flash cookies are the all-pervasive app

In order to understand zombie cookies (yes, that's the technical name), you need to know about Flash's Local Shared Objects, or LSO's — the formal name for Flash cookies. Adobe Flash Player LSO's work much like the cookies maintained by our browsers — they are files that live in our computers and are updated and read by some Web pages that we visit.

Since Flash Player runs on more computers than even Windows, Flash Cookies are as close to universal as anything on the Internet.

Like standard cookies, LSO's usually fly under the radar. But they can store significantly more data than the usual cookie. Regular old browser cookies are limited to 4KB in size; LSO's can go up to 100KB. Regular cookies are completely controlled by your browser — you can use your browser to turn them on or off, to delete them, to block them. Not so LSO's. They are controlled by Adobe's Flash Player, and it's notoriously difficult to get at them.

While you may not have easy access to Flash LSO's, Web sites do. If you have Adobe Flash installed on your computer, Web pages can set and read Flash cookies — whether the page you're viewing has a visible Flash animation or not. So while you think you've blocked a site's cookies, it's entirely possible for the site to use an LSO for the same purpose.

And it's all hidden under the covers and difficult to turn off unless you run a Flash Cookie blocker (more about which later) or jump through some major hoops.

Cookies that return from the cookie-crusher

Most PC users know the basics of Web cookies. Most have their computers set up to block third-party cookies, or delete all cookies when they end a browsing session. It's all based on your level of paranoia. You may have a spyware scanner that looks for and deletes various types of cookies, particularly from marketing companies such as Doubleclick. Even those of us who allow cookies free rein still delete them from time to time, if only to clear out the cobwebs.

Here's how zombie cookies reappear.

When you visit Web sites, they often plant cookies on your computer, if they can. But some sites will also stick duplicate cookies into the Flash LSO. When you go back to these sites, they check whether you have their standard cookies stored in your browser. If none are found, they then check whether there's any doppelgänger cookies in the Flash LSO. And if they find any, the sites reconstruct their original cookies and stick them back into your PC. Very clever.

Zombie cookies are scary because they provide online companies with a secret way to keep tabs on people and their Web-surfing activities. Unless you check your browser's list of cookies regularly, you may never know that these resurrected tracking cookies are back in business.

Where companies like Quantcast come into play

Data-gathering companies such as Quantcast make money selling information about people who visit web sites. According to Quantcast's own site, "Millions of Web site owners, including two-thirds of the Online Publisher's Association, use Quantcast's measurement service to create demographic, geographic, and affinity-based audience profiles." And the cookies placed on your PC can be used as sophisticated monitoring tools.

Curious about what's gathered? You can take a free ride with the Quantcast demo.

<http://www.quantcast.com/info/measure>

It's in the interest of Quantcast to continually gather data about Web-site visitors. Cookies, as already mentioned, are a key part of that process. Zombie cookies undoubtedly contribute to keeping these tracking cookies alive for as long as possible.

Take control of Flash cookies with PC cleaners

Fortunately, most of our customers will be well acquainted with **Cleaner**, which will do the job very nicely. In fact if you've run it monthly as we suggest, your PC may have never even met a "Zombie Cookie".

Certainly, the zombie cookie approach to subverting a user's direct commands — reinstating a cookie after the user has explicitly deleted it — constitutes some sort of privacy invasion. Whether it's actionable in court is anybody's guess.

Preparing Windows XP for the long haul

Microsoft's support for Windows XP may be fading, but a loyal horde of XP users plans to stick with this venerable OS for as long as possible.

If that's your long-term goal, there are a number of steps you can take now to ensure a finely tuned XP system for months — possibly years — to come.

Windows XP is almost a decade old, which in both computing and dog years makes it very long in the tooth.

Microsoft has officially dropped support and security updates for all XP versions up to Service Pack 2. The only version of 32-bit XP that still qualifies for Microsoft's security patches and major bug-fixes is the Service Pack 3 edition. (The relatively rare 64-bit flavour of XP is a special case)

XP has had a long and excellent run, but SP3 is the end of the line.

That said, XP is not dead, and it's still the best OS for older hardware designed with XP in mind.

If you're still using an XP box by choice (or necessity), there's lots you can do to keep things humming along until you eventually move to new hardware — which will almost assuredly come with the excellent Windows 7 already installed.

Here are some key steps you can take to get — and keep — your XP system running great! And if you move to Windows 7 (or are also running Vista machines), many of these techniques can also help you.

Start with a thorough XP system check-up

►**Check the hardware.** Hardware? Yes! No operating system can be better than the hardware on which it's installed, and older systems are prone to age-related problems. One often-overlooked problem is dust build-up, which can cause chips and drives to overheat and malfunction. These hardware errors can masquerade as software problems, causing you to waste time troubleshooting the wrong thing.

It's easy to clean your PC. Take off the side panels and go outside with a paint brush and a can of compressed air. While you have your PC's case open, make sure that all plug-in cards and socketed chips are fully seated and all cables firmly connected.

►**Check your hard drive's "physical" health.** Most new and XP-era drives are equipped with Self-Monitoring, Analysis and Reporting Technology, also known as SMART reporting. SMART data is stored within the hard drive itself and can often alert you to impending problems before they get serious.

It's easy to check the SMART data. Two tools I like are PassMark's DiskCheckup (<http://www.passmark.com/>

[products/diskcheckup.htm](http://www.passmark.com/products/diskcheckup.htm)) and Active@ DiskMonitor-Free (<http://www.disk-monitor.com/download.html>). Both programs are free for personal use and also come in commercial versions for organizations.

►**Check your hard drive's "logical" health.** Run `chkdsk.exe` to check the integrity of your hard drive's files and to repair any errors.

Click Start and Run, then type `chkdsk c: /f` into the Run dialog box. Hit OK.

Chkdsk may tell you that it can't check the drive because the drive is in use. It will then offer to check the drive at reboot. Type Y (yes) and hit the Enter key.

Repeat for all drives/partitions on your system.

►**Correct driver errors now, while you can.** Just as Microsoft is providing less support for XP, third-party vendors are withdrawing support for older hardware. Someday soon, you may discover that the drivers you need are no longer available. Fix problems now!

Boot XP and right-click My Computer. Select Properties, Hardware, then Device Manager. (Or, click Control Panel/System/Hardware/Device Manager.) Click View and select Show hidden devices to make sure you're seeing everything.

Correct any problem indicated by a yellow exclamation mark or a red X; in most cases, you should get correct or updated drivers from the hardware vendor's site.

It might also be wise to save copies of any special drivers your systems needs; burn them to a CD or DVD, and tuck the disc away in a safe place.

Review and update your PC's security system

►**Patch and update XP and apps.** Starting with Windows Update, make sure your operating system is fully up-to-date with all necessary patches, fixes, and updates. Do the same for all your non-Microsoft software, visiting the vendor sites to download any new updates and patches for your applications and utilities. A tool such as Secunia's outstanding, free-for-home-use Personal Software Inspector (PSI) (http://secunia.com/vulnerability_scanning/personal) can make this step a breeze.

►**Verify system security.** Regardless of the antivirus and anti-malware tools you're using, visit a competing vendor's site and run their free live or online scan to verify that nothing slipped past your usual defences. MS Security Essentials is a good one at (<http://onecare.live.com/site/en-us/default.htm>).

Next, check that your firewall is providing the protection it

should. There are many good, free, online firewall-test sites, such as Gibson Research (<https://www.grc.com/x/ne.dll?bh0bkyd2>).

Give your computer a thorough file cleaning

►**Take out the trash — all of it.** Needless file clutter makes a system harder to use and slower to operate. For example, AV scans and Windows' indexing both take longer when they have many junk files to process.

Start by deleting old `$NtUninstall{xxx}$` files from XP's C:\Windows folder; these files can occupy a shocking amount of space! You need these files only when a Windows Update fails and you (or the OS) have to roll back your system. If your system is working fine, `$NtUninstall` files serve no purpose.

Next, wade through your hard drive, folder by folder, making sure files are where they're supposed to be and that you're not storing needless duplicates or other useless files.

Next, uninstall obsolete or unused software.

Finally, use a tool such as Piriform's free CCleaner (<http://www.piriform.com/ccleaner>) to rid your drive of useless junk files and broken or obsolete Registry data.

►**Rein in XP's three worst space-hogs.** System Restore, the Recycle Bin, and browser caches are like black holes for data, and your system can run better if you limit their voracious appetites.

System Restore is at best a limited recovery tool, so I don't feel it's worthwhile to devote vast amounts of disk space to it. The Kellys-Korner, "System Restore for Windows XP," (http://www.kellys-korner-xp.com/xp_restore.htm) tells you how to manage it.

Windows' default Recycle Bin can consume hundreds of gigabytes on a large drive. Pare this down to a reasonable size by right-clicking the Recycle Bin and selecting Properties. Reduce the size of the Recycle Bin to a smaller percentage of the total disk space. (Click the disk tab — e.g., Local Disk (C:) — to determine its reserved Recycle Bin space in gigabytes.) I set it to around 500 MB (0.5GB) on large disks and 250MB (0.25GB) on smaller ones.

To reduce Internet Explorer's cache size, click Tools and Internet Options. Then, under the Browsing History section, click Settings and adjust the cache size downward to, say, 50MB.

For Firefox, click Tools/Options and then click Advanced. Under the Network tab, look for the settings box in the Offline Storage section.

Chrome's cache-size adjustment uses the command line, as described on a Chrome Help forum (<http://www.google.com/support/forum/p/Chrome/thread?tid=098d42a41aacdc6d&hl=en>).

►**Defrag.** Once your disk is rid of all unnecessary files and is organized the way you want, run your defragmentation tool to reorder your files for optimal performance. If your disk was badly fragmented, it may take several iterations of defragging to achieve maximum benefit.

Use disk imaging to preserve your new setup

Once you've worked through all the above, your XP system should be lean, clean, defragged, and fully up-to-date. Wouldn't it be great if you could somehow preserve your PC's current software state so that, should you ever need to in the future, you can bring it back to this nearly perfect condition in just minutes?

You can! Use a disk imaging tool to create a perfect, complete, working copy of your current setup. You'll never again have to rebuild your system and reinstall all your software from scratch!

XP requires third-party disk-imaging software (Win7 has it built in) such as Acronis' £29.99 True Image (<http://www.acronis.com/homecomputing/products/trueimage/>), or — my personal favourite for non-Win7 systems — Terabyte Unlimited geeky-but-powerful \$35 BootItNG (<http://www.terabyteunlimited.com/bootit-next-generation.htm>).

Both programs make disk images and bootable recovery discs that can be used to restore a complete, everything-installed-and-working setup — even to a raw, unformatted drive.

There's plenty of free disk imaging software available, too. For example, see Freebyte's (<http://www.freebyte.com/filediskutils/#freediskimagesoftware>) titled "Free disk image software;" TheFreeCountry's (<http://www.thefreecountry.com/utilities/backupandimage.shtml>) of "Free hard disk and partition imaging and backup software;" or OptimizingPC's (<http://www.optimizingpc.com/howtouse/imagebootdisk.html>), "Create free bootable Windows XP image disk."

Run through the above steps once or twice a year to keep your system in tip-top shape, and make a fresh disk image from time to time — especially if you make any significant changes to your hardware or software. Store your disk images in a safe place (off the hard drive), such as on CDs or DVDs stored away from your PC.

With this kind of routine maintenance, your XP system will most likely run well for as long as you need it. And, should the worst (major crash, hard drive failure, etc.) happen, you can use your disk images to rapidly restore your system to the near-perfect state you just created.

You're now set for the long haul!

Software to organize your photo collection

The most daunting task for digital photographers of all types, from snap shooter to pro, is organizing the hundreds or thousands of images they've captured.

You can put your images into simple folders, but free or inexpensive photo organizers are a better way to wring order from chaos.

Use tags to make images easy to search and sort

You probably have no idea how many digital photos you've accumulated, but even if it's just a few hundred, by now you've undoubtedly discovered that searching for a specific shot can be a difficult and time-consuming task. So, under which folder did you file that great photo of your nephew George (taken at his mother's third wedding)? Was it George, Wacky Weddings, or 2008-12-Mary's 3rd?

Unless you have an, uh, photographic memory, the best way to find that one outstanding image again is to give it descriptive tags. Later, you can use the tags to quickly filter, sort, and otherwise reorganize your photo library.

Tags are stored as metadata — data stored within a file's header and describing the file's contents. When you move an image file from one computer or storage device to another, the tags always go with it. Some of these tags are standardized, so you can utilize them regardless of what image viewer or operating system you have.

Good photo organizers make the process of adding tags and using tags quick and easy. These apps let you tag photos in all sorts of ways, including adding multiple tags to the same image. That way one photo — a family portrait on a beach in Dorset, for instance — can be sorted by various categories: for example, holidays, brother Frank, Weymouth, and so forth.

The most appealing photo organizers, like the best things in life, are free. Two of the better ones come from Google and Microsoft. I'll tell you what they have to offer, and I'll add an extra little program, too.

But before you start using any photo organizer, consider this: each program has special tags that cannot be read by another app. For example, the People tags in both of these organizers may look the same, but that tag created in one application is invisible to another. So, once you've started using, say, Google's product to tag people in a few thousand images, switching to another organizer may negate many hours of work.

You can get around this incompatibility by using the universal, generic tags for people as well as for places and events. But you lose the program's people-searching abilities if you do that.

So take some time to try different organizers before settling on one. You'll find that each has its own style and a few specialized features not found in competing products.

Photo organizer puts your images on the map

A free download (http://picasa.google.com/#utm_campaign=en&utm_source=en-ha-na-us-bk&utm_medium=ha&utm_term=picasa) from Google, Picasa 3's specialty is keeping track of where you took your photos. Of course, you or your camera must first tell Picasa where the picture was taken.

GPS and geotagging are finding their way into a few digital still cameras and many smart-phones. When you snap the shutter, the longitude and latitude are saved as part of each photo's metadata. Click Picasa's Places tab, and the camera location gets pinpointed in a small Google Maps window. You can also geotag a photo manually by selecting a point on that map or in Google Earth.

Picasa's People tags go a long way in helping you identify who's in a photo, although they're still far from automatic. The program finds faces in the photos, makes a guess as to who it is, and lets you accept it or correct it. If you use Gmail, it fills in the name from your address book.

In my experience, Picasa correctly identifies and tags a face about half the time. That's enough to significantly cut the amount of time you spend telling it who's in your photos.

Picasa's regular, generic tags seem like an afterthought. The navigation panel on the left lets you easily find images by Albums, People, Projects, and Folders — but not by tag. You have to use the less-convenient search tool for that.

A good photo organizer should offer at least minimal editing capabilities, and Picasa's are that — minimal. You can crop and straighten photos, fix redden, add text, and even click an option called I'm Feeling Lucky (I wasn't lucky). The only option for manually correcting exposure is a Fill Light slider bar.

Once your photos are ready for the world, you can print them, order prints online, export them to another folder, blog them, e-mail them (with a very Gmail-friendly tool), or upload them to Picasa Web Albums.

Organize images with hierarchical tags

Microsoft's organizer is all about tags. It has the specialized People tags, but it was the simple, generic tags that Microsoft really ran with.

For one thing, Microsoft made these tags hierarchical — like the folders on your hard drive. Your France tag, your Germany tag, and your Africa tag can all go inside your Travel tag, making them easier to group and organize. When you select the Travel tag, you get all photos tagged Travel or tagged with one of the sub-tags. These nested tags show up in non-hierarchical programs, such as Picasa, as a path — for example, Travel/Africa.

Photo Gallery doesn't look particularly pretty, but anyone who's used Windows Explorer will know immediately how to navigate it. The hierarchical left-hand navigation panel lets

you click on folders (described by the header All photos and videos), plus Date taken, People tags, and the generic Descriptive tags. Click a tag, and you'll get thumbnails of all the photos with that tag and all the photos with that tag's sub-tags.

Photo Gallery doesn't do People tags particularly well. Yes, it finds faces, and it asks you to identify them, but it doesn't even try to guess based on people you've identified in other photos. And there's no geotagging of any sort.

On the other hand, Photo Gallery's editing tools far outdo Picasa's — it has a fine assortment of controls for adjusting exposure, colour, and sharpness. With exposure, for example, you have separate sliders for brightness, contrast, shadows, and highlights, plus an adjustable histogram.

Once your pictures are organized and ready, you can print them, order prints online, upload the photos to Flickr or Windows Live's own Web service, or post to a blog.

The original Windows Photo Gallery was part of Vista, but Microsoft wisely improved it, separated it from the OS, and made it part of the Windows Live series of free applications (<http://explore.live.com/windows-live-essentials?os=other>).

One other consideration when choosing Photo Gallery: it's tightly tied into the Windows Live system of applications and social networking. If you're concerned about privacy issues, just select No to any installation option that isn't about photographs. Don't change your search provider or your home page, don't offer to improve Windows Live, and don't get yourself a Windows Live ID.

A new photo gallery for Vista and Windows 7

If you click the Learn about the beta link on the Photo Gallery download (<http://explore.live.com/windows-live-photo-gallery>), you'll find a very different, work-in-progress Windows Live Photo Gallery beta. Like any beta, it's use-at-your-own-risk, although I found no bugs in it.

But I did find limitations. For one, it won't work with XP. For another, it can't co-exist with the current version of Windows Live Photo Gallery. When you install the beta, the standard, stable version disappears. According to a Microsoft spokesperson, this version "will come out of beta later this summer." XP users should download and install the current version now.

It's clear that Microsoft wanted this version of Gallery to act like Picasa but look like Microsoft Office. Tabbed ribbons at the top of the window display all the program's tools as attractive icons.

This new Gallery also offers geotagging, but without Picasa's map-based finesse. Click on a photo taken by a GPS-equipped camera, and up pops a description of the location — but not necessarily a useful one. You can however, manually add geotag by typing in a city names.

Microsoft has changed the People tag a bit but hasn't really improved it. It almost never guesses correctly who someone is.

But most disappointing in the beta version of Gallery is the loss of easily accessed hierarchical tags. So to select specific tags, you now go to the Find ribbon and pull down the Tags menu for a flat, non-hierarchical list. This list does, however, put the most-used tags at the top for greater convenience and includes a link that opens a hierarchical list in a separate window.

The new Photo Gallery's editing tools are still excellent (for an organizer). If you're looking at the picture in thumbnail view, you get quick, automatic adjustments. View the photo full-screen, and you have the same tweaking abilities as the old version. You can also combine photos into a panorama or fuse two very similar ones into a composite photo.

Image resizer shrinks photos in a flash

Here's the best type of utility photo application: it does one thing but does it exceptionally well.

VSO's Image Resizer (http://www.vso-software.fr/products/image_resizer/) resizes photos quickly and easily — handy if you want to save storage space, share images via e-mail, or post them on your blog. It can also convert images to other formats or compress them into .zip files — although most photos don't compress well.

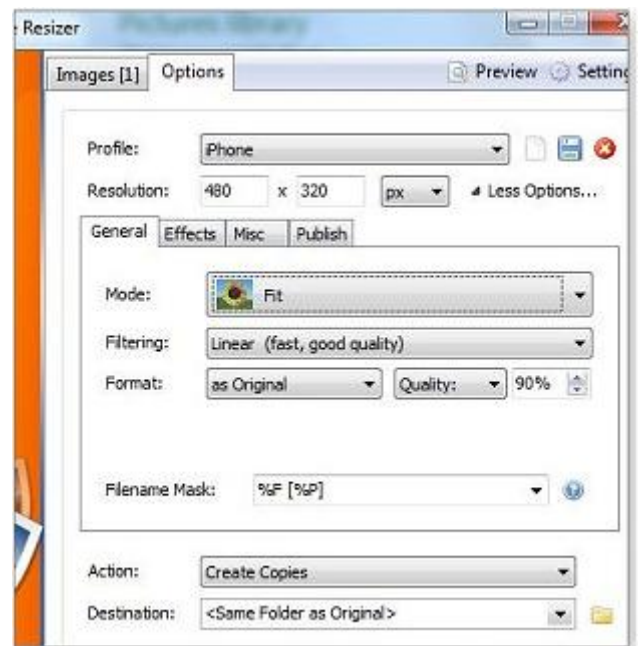


Image resizer loads from the start menu, or you can right-click one or more images in Windows Explorer and select VSO Image Resizer from the context menu. Select an image size (there are presets), define how the shrinking will affect the shape of the picture, add a watermark, or invert colours. Once done, you can easily send your work off by e-mail.

The free version of Image Resizer is nagware. It's fully functional, but each time you load it you'll have to wait five seconds while it tells you that you really should register. Doing so costs £13.99.

Laptop Hire, It doesn't need to cost the Earth!



When we started out laptop hire service a few months ago. We thought that it would be a bit of a gamble.

We thought that the laptops would get purloined or damaged and expenses would exceed income.

But I'm glad to say that all our customers that have hired a laptop have treated them carefully. Maybe beginners luck, but everyone has treated them as if they were their own.

One customer used the laptop to buy a new car on an auction site, he said he would have lost the bargain if he had not hired the laptop.

The only negative feedback we had was the daily rate of £30 made people think twice before hiring.

When we originally decided on the prices, we looked at the competition and the going rate was around £45 per day, so naturally we went in at £30 per day.

To see if we were missing something, I telephoned a laptop hirer in Milton Keynes and although a bit cagey they told me that they kept the price high to discourage domestic hire. It seemed they were only interested in corporate hire with businesses that didn't mind paying through the nose. (My words).

So to encourage more of our customers to use the service, we've got an additional 5 laptops all setup and ready to go and slashed the price to £15 per day. Weekly rates are even better at £40 and monthly at £75. (All prices + vat). A refundable deposit of £250 is required, but we can take a card and an optional damage insurance of £2.50 per day if you want to be covered 100%.

All data gets wiped at the end of hire and we can transfer data to and from as required.

We use the IBM ThinkPad laptops running Win XP Pro, because they are sturdy and hardwearing. But if you need something a bit more upmarket we also have some Toshiba widescreen laptops running Windows 7.

For more information and full prices, see:

http://www.computerdoctors.co.uk/pages/laptop_hire.htm

Can I upgrade to Win 7?



The question that everyone is asking at the moment is, "Can I upgrade my PC to Windows 7"?

The answer is not always easy, but as a general rule if you have a fairly mainstream PC or laptop produced by one of the well known manufacturers and its running Windows Vista, then you should be OK.

Anything a bit special you may have a problem with.

If your PC is running Windows XP then you can't carry out an upgrade. From XP you have to do a clean install, which in many ways makes life easier. Although, you will need to back up any data and restore it to the new installation and you may have problems with old hardware in the PC that doesn't have drivers for Windows 7.

This is not insurmountable problem with a PC tower where you can swap out the hardware easily, but changing hardware on a laptop is usually uneconomic.

You must also take into account any peripherals you may have such as printers etc. and any old software that you have grown attached to.

Often software manufacturers will have released a new version to run on Windows 7 and if you wish to carry on using the software, you must upgrade to this new version.

Printer and other peripheral manufacturers may have also produced drivers to allow their hardware to work with Windows 7 and you can usually check this by going to their website and following the links to "Support" or "Driver Downloads" and seeing if a driver is available.

Often if your PC is more than 3 or 4 years old then it may be cheaper in the long run to replace the tower or laptop.

The cost of the Windows 7 licence is £70—£100 (Windows 7 Home Premium), we charge £65.00 for installation and options including backing up and transferring data (£50 1st user, £20 per additional user), installing standard security pack (£10), onsite setup to connect broadband, printers etc. (Providing drivers are available) (£30).

So you can see, if the PC or laptop is a few years old it makes sense to put the money towards a new one with 12 months warranty.

If your PC does meet all the requirements, then download and run Microsoft's "Windows 7 upgrade Advisor". Run it with all your usual peripherals attached and it will tell you if any hardware or software installed will give Windows 7 a problem.

You can download the upgrade advisor from our download page or direct from:

<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windows->

How much are your laptops?

If I had a pound for every time I'd answered the phone and heard that question, this time next year I'd be a millionaire.

The trouble is, it's a bit like going into a car dealers and asking, "how much does a car cost"? Obviously, nobody would dream of buying a car on price alone, then find the first time they had to take the kids to school, they couldn't get them all inside the little Daihatsu they had purchased.



Foehn & Hirsch Slimline
£439.00

But it happens all the time with computers. At least with a car you can see what you are getting to some extent. But computers look pretty much all alike.

We've had lots of customers bring in laptops that they

have purchased from Tesco's or some other supermarket, that are struggling to cope with even the basic needs of the customer.

The reason is that when purchasing the laptop they didn't take into account what they wanted the laptop for and usually there is no one around to give them any advice on individual products.

Some of the requirements are pretty obvious. If you have lots of photos or music that you wish to keep on the PC then a large hard drive is essential. If you are not going to play fast action games, then you can save money by not having an expensive graphics system, and so on.

Whether it's a car or a computer, if you don't know too much about the subject, then take someone with you that has some experience. If you don't know anyone, then find a retailer that you can trust. A recommendation is always a good start, failing that have a look at their website to see their credentials and if they are willing to play fair with their customers.

(B.T.W. You can see our credentials at:

<http://www.computerdoctors.co.uk/pages/guilds.htm>)

The new Northamptonshire "Buy with Confidence" scheme is one to look out for, but because it's new in this area, there are not many retailers signed up to it yet.

But it does have the backing of trading standards and they are very thorough and have the interest of the customer as prime consideration unlike some of the retailers trade schemes.



You can find our more at:

<http://www.buywithconfidence.gov.uk/traders/>

Viper i3 Back in stock.

It seems that Intel are able, once again, to keep up with the demand for their new i3 processor.

The combination of outright power, features and low price have meant that none of the competition can come close.

Viper are once again able to supply the Viper i3-530 tower with no increase in price. Some other manufacturers have increased their prices to take advantage of the shortage in processor chips.



The viper i3-350 has the 2.93MHz dual core version of the processor and each core runs two virtual cores to give the power of a quad core processor.

To support virtualisation advances have been made to motherboards and RAM, so both these items are special to these PC's.

Coupled with the 64bit Operating System (Windows 7 Home Pre-

mium) this allows the PC to take full advantage of the 4Gb of DDR3 RAM fitted. (Most 32bit Operating Systems will only acknowledge the first 3.25Gb of RAM).

The enhanced motherboard has the best onboard sound and graphics that we have seen and generally these will be sufficient for 90% of customers. However we have the option of a gaming graphics card if you need the extra performance for fast action gaming.

The standard hard drive is 1Tb (1,000 Gb) and this provides a huge repository for documents, photos, music, videos, indeed anything that you wish to store on your PC.

It's not often that you get such an evolutionary step forward in computer technology that doesn't cost the earth.

We believe the "i" processors (i3, i5 & i7) will be the standard in computing for the next few years.

We all know that the PC or laptop that you buy today is already out of date by tomorrow, that is the way of all electronic equipment, but if you are purchasing a new PC and want to future proof your investment, then the i3 is the way to go.

The Viper i3-530 costs **£499.00** including vat (until the vat increases on January 4th).

Full specification on our website at:

<http://www.computerdoctors.co.uk/shop/desktop.htm>

Or call sales on 01604 415984

View from the Backside



eras were in operation. In Woodstock, 110 drivers were caught exceeding the 30mph limit, which is 18% more than the average for 2010.

One despicable creature, when interviewed said, "I was only giving it some stick through Woodstock because my granny had just been taken into hospital... and we suddenly realised she hadn't signed her will. As I have a BMW I was naturally nominated to get there fast and ensure a favourable outcome for all concerned". When confronted with the fact that the general hospital was nowhere near Woodstock he broke down and confessed, "OK, it's a fair cop, I'm not really from Woodstock, I'm one of those miserable sinners from Cowley, it's due to the inconsiderate and selfish behaviour of people like me that the national statistics get distorted and the motoring public at large have to face the dire consequences"! At which point an angry crowd gathered round and stoned him to death, keeping their hoods up and a watchful eye on the CCTV street camera.

One wonders what other merry quips our government may be dreaming up for us. The Home Secretary, Teresa May, has admirably, suggested a 24 hour amnesty for anyone murdering a drug dealer. This will encourage drug takers to a) Eliminate their own source of supply, and b) get incarcerated for homicide when, after 24 hours she says, "Yeah but, no but, I only dun it for a laugh".

And you thought scrapping Asbo's was controversial!

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If this has been passed to you from a friend and you would like your own regular copy, just go to:

www.computerdoctors.co.uk/newsletter



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

It turns out that the powers that be have played a jolly jape on the citizens of Oxfordshire, when they promised to turn off the speed camera's due to budget cuts.

Just for a laugh, they left a few on, to see if the public would start speeding again.

Data from these cameras has revealed that speeding has increased by 88% in some locations, according to Thames Valley Safer Road Partnership. The tests were carried out in Watlington Road, Cowley, and the A44 in Woodstock.

In Cowley, 62 people were clocked speeding – representing a rise of 88% compared with when fixed speed cam-

Contact us

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