You & Your Computer No. 2 – Good Practices

Data stored on your computer is one of your most important assets and should be regularly backed up and usually stored somewhere away from the computer. Could you run your business if you lost all your data files? On Windows XP all the data files are usually stored under the 'My Documents' directory tree. Two of the most common backup medias are the CD ROM or the USB (Universal Serial Bus) flash disk. With CD ROMs you use a program like Nero (http://www.nero.com) to burn an image of the files onto the disk. Becoming more common now is the USB flash disk which is a small device that plugs into a spare USB port on your computer and automatically shows up as a new disk drive that you can use the normal windows procedures to copy files to.

Over the past few years there has been a great increase in people using the Internet – especially for email, chat and on-line gaming. Now more computers are permanently connected to the internet via broadband This has unfortunately lead to individuals and companies thinking it would be great fun to attack your computer either directly or by sending a virus attached to a piece of email.

The first line of deference is called a firewall – which creates a virtual barrier between your computer and the Internet. If you are running Windows XP and have all the updates including the 'famous' Service Pack 2, then you have a firewall ready to go. To make sure the firewall is enabled follow these steps: either double clicking the 'Windows Firewall' icon in the control panel or click the 'Start' button select 'Run...' and type 'firewall.cpl' into the box that appears and press RETURN. A window will appear, consisting of three tabs – General, Exceptions and Advanced (figure 1). On the General tab select the On (recommended) option. The exceptions tab allows you to define applications that can bypass the firewall – use with care. Otherwise you will need to purchase a stand-alone firewall program; here I would recommend Norton Firewall (http://www.symantec.com).

Windows XP also offers a combined 'security centre' which shows the status of the firewall (figure 1), automatic updates (figure 2) and virus protection (figure 3). You can access this by double clicking the 'Security Centre' icon in the control panel.
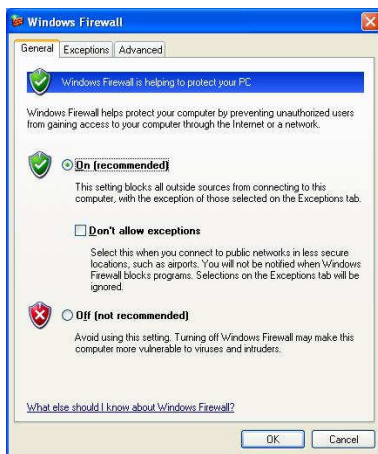
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

The second line of deference is an antivirus program. This software will detect and remove any existing virus on your system as well as block any that try to gain access. Whatever antivirus program you use, you must make sure that you keep the virus definitions (these recognise the signatures of each virus and there are new virus being produced round the clock) up to date. This is usually done via a program option while you are connected to the Internet – some even display a warning message when the virus definitions are out of date. A new wrinkle to this is so called spyware. This type of virus will sit on your computer spying on your browsing

habits. Effects of spyware can range from collecting details of the websites you visit to send you targeted advertising to recording your keystrokes as you enter a password (key logger). Recommend antivirus programs are Norton Antivirus (http://www.symantec.com) and AVG Antivirus (http://www.grisoft.com). AVG has a version that is free for non-commercial use. For spyware detection I recommend the Adware personal SE Edition from Lavasoft (http://www.lavasoft.com). This is also free for non-commercial use. For a small registration fee you can also purchase a licence for the real-time spyware detection module. Also recommended is CCleaner (http://www.ccleaner.com), which can be configured to remove all traces of your browsing activity.

I also recommend that you keep Windows XP updated by making sure you download all the updates. See http://windowsupdate.mircosoft.com. You can configure Windows XP to automatically download and optionally install updates by double clicking the 'Automatic Updates' icon in the control panel (figure 2).

As an aside take a look at Google Earth (http://earth.google.com). You can zoom in on any area of the globe from anywhere between orbiting heights of 37,000 miles to 40ft. At around 600 ft high-resolution aerial photographs replace satellite images. Major cities are highlighted, and you can toggle roads, rivers, etc. The directions tab lets you enter any two locations anywhere on the globe and Google Earth will give you directions from one to the other. There are also links to articles, photos and video clips. The 3D modelling of the Grand Canyon is quite impressive. There are not enough hours in the day to explore all the possibilities of Google Earth.

That's it for this week, please send any questions or comments to the following email address youandyourcomputer@endhousesoftware.com or phone the helpline on 690 249 745. I also offer computer lessons, maintenance and web design services at very competitive rates.

By Gavin Baker.