

Your part-time job

The trials and tribulations of being a “computer person”

Tony Mobily

Being a “computer person” these days is a very stressful business. Forget about angry customers, missed deadlines, unreasonable bosses and co-workers, shrinking wages, etc. Those are just things you get used to after a while.

For me, the real stress starts when I get out of the office, and I turn on my phone. I get the first call and I think: I wonder who that’ll be; maybe Dave (yes, Dave Guard, our editor), maybe he wants to go and have a beer with me (he complained “But I don’t drink beer?” when he edited this editorial...). But no, it’s my cousin: his computer is behaving “oddly”, and his internet connection has slowed down terribly (yes, he’s sending spam... and he doesn’t know it yet). He begs me to go and have a look at it. I try to explain to him that even though I am a computer person, I don’t know anything about viruses on Windows XP. The begging goes on and on, until I give in and say with a sigh: all right, I’ll come and have a look at it.

Andrea and I (he’s a computer person too) worked out that, even for us, fixing a Windows XP machine takes about 8 hours, because we don’t do it as a job and we’re not fully equipped for it. To reinstall a system you need to back the previous information up, reinstall the system, install all the drivers (if the driver CDs ever existed), install all the patches and service packs, install the software that was previously installed, answer the question “Why is Office is not part of Windows?!?”, discover that they had a crucial, weird device XYZ with no drivers available, and so on. This process is very stressful, and can go very wrong (in fact, I know it *never* goes smoothly). And after all of this you need to pray that doing, what you’ve spent hours doing, has solved the problem.

Now, I have a big family: 10 aunts and uncles, 25 cousins (including the ones once removed etc.), and roughly another 15 relatives who I’ll put in the “other” category. That’s 50 people, and on average, they’ll have two “serious problems” with their computers

every year. That’s 100 “major incidents” (with all the begging and everything) per year.

A year is 365 days. 13 of them are public holidays. 104 are Saturdays and Sundays. 10 days for sick leave. So I’m left with 238 working days.

This means that if I were to respond to all of the emergency calls I receive, I would spend nearly half of my working life reinstalling Windows XP for my relatives. I obviously don’t do that (otherwise, you wouldn’t be reading this magazine). But saying “no” to your relatives at least twice a week is awkward.

I’m writing this editorial after discovering that Microsoft is planning to buy Sybari Software, and will (probably) make more money off computer viruses. My own mother’s computer is infected at the moment, and she is some 14000 Km away – I am powerless, and I can’t even fix it by remote because the virus is using all her bandwidth. I feel angry, because I can’t stop thinking that if Microsoft makes real money thanks to viruses, they’ll never make their systems secure (and you know they could). And that really *is* a problem.

This month’s issue is about spam, which is a problem closely related to viruses and Windows security. I’d have loved to publish an article entitled “How to solve the spam problem - forever”, but I can’t because such a solution doesn’t exist yet.

I do look forward to the day when I can publish such an article, but until that day comes, I’ll present you with some of the best ways we can defend ourselves against the invasion of spam. Good luck...

Copyright information

© by Tony Mobily

Verbatim copying and distribution of this entire article is permit-

ted in any medium without royalty provided this notice is preserved.

About the author

Tony Mobily is the Editor In Chief of Free Software Magazine