Real-life Ideas to get more from your PC

This is the first in a series of bulletins that describe some real-life experiences that I and other users have had with their computers. These ideas are economical and should provide useful extra functionality.

And if readers have their own experiences they would like to contribute, please feel free to tell us about them on our contact page:

www.rayhennig.com/informatique/contact.html.

■ Vista Laptop Memory – or lack of it?

A client brought his new laptop, complaining that it was slow to the point of almost coming to a halt. It is an Acer machine with a useful 17 inch screen, large hard disc and 1 GByte main memory.

The first thing I asked was whether he wished to keep the Vista visuals. No, he was more than happy with the standard, simplified XP look which, in fact, is the same look he'd had since Windows 2000 and Windows 98 before that.

So, I set about my 10-point procedure for removing Vista annoyances, including anything that consumes resources (memory or processor) unnecessarily. The result was still on the slow side but a distinct improvement. So, what next?

I studied the use of memory in the machine and realised that, whilst the PC was advertised as having 1 GByte main memory, the graphic adapter shared a good chunk of this, reducing the memory available to Windows to around 750 Mbytes. Windows Vista really needs more than this if you're in any sort of a hurry.

The message here was that the machine really needs more memory to be fitted. But in the meantime, I got the clients agreement to remove the installed antivirus and anti-spyware programs. These products are sometimes installed as 'trial versions' on new PCs and they frequently consume significant resources. Then, after a while, they cease to upgrade themselves unless you pay a licence fee or subscription. To keep him safe, he installed a free-of-charge antivirus program that consumes far less resources and offers excellent protection. Coupled with that, he installed another free, highly respected program that scans and eliminates spyware. We believe he is well protected now and the performance is far more acceptable.

The final chapter in this story is that he has now invested around 50 Euro in 4 Gbytes of memory. We replaced the original two 0.5 Gbyte modules with two 2 Gbyte modules and things are now romping along at a good pace.

■ Risk of Damage to your PC

STATIC ELECTRICITY

- Static can destroy delicate components.
- Earth yourself when working in the PC.
- Work on a humid or rainy day.
- If in ANY doubt, consult a professional.

■ Sound card to drive HiFi – Excellent results

This one will interest the audio or hi-fi enthusiasts. It is also a low-cost enhancement that gives immediate results.

We've had a fairly good hi-fi system in our kitchen/family room for some years and a bit of music often goes down well with guests. There's a reasonable collection of CDs but I noticed that some were getting damaged and that the ageing (but high quality) CD player was having difficulty playing some CDs.

The first step was to 'rip' the CDs to the PC's hard disc. This was not 100% straightforward but once we got this right, the results became better and more predictable. So now a good number of our CDs are safely stored on a hard disc and have been catalogued by the WinAmp media player.

It was a simple matter to plug the hi-fi into the PC and we were soon enjoying reasonable sound. Sadly, to my mind, there was something wrong. The sound in no way matched that from the original CD player. It was certainly not the ripping process as the files had been tested and the results were first rate. That left only the PC's sound facilities.

As luck would have it, I found in my stock of old components a discarded SoundBlaster PCI sound card with gold-finished sockets that hinted of better-than-average quality. In it went.

And the results? Stunning.

I had not hoped for anything like that level of improvement. I and several friends have agreed that the computer, aside from the noise of its fans, produces a far more detailed and smooth sound quality than the CD player. A real hi-fi result.

And the cost of all this?

Well, I already had the sound card so no money changed hands. But I've just looked on Amazon and found sound cards starting at around 35 Euro.

I shall report again on this as I am now yearning to try a higher quality sound card and I'm also desperate to muffle the noise from the PC. In all respects, a thoroughly rewarding project.

■ Safety First

DANGER: 230 VOLTS

- Remember that electrical equipment can be dangerous.
- Make sure that you understand what you're doing.
- If in ANY doubt, consult a professional.