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Sunday 18 May 2003

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Bootcamp 273: Windows XP Tips, part one
(Filed: 01/05/2003)

COMPLETE BOOTCAMP ARCHIVE

Top traumas solved by Rick Maybury

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In general, Windows XP is living up to the promise of improved speed and stability. But like all operating systems it is configured for a notional average user.

Understandably, many people find that Microsoft's way of doing things is not necessarily theirs and XP also takes a lot for granted.

Where, in previous Windows versions, many automated features were switched off by default, you find with XP that all sorts of things are going on in the background that you may not want, or be aware of.

Over the next couple of weeks we will show you how to adapt XP to your way of working and put you back in control with a selection of hints and tips, most of which work with both the Home and Professional versions.

We begin with a trio of tweaks concerned with starting and shutting down your computer.

This first tip is an update of a popular Windows 98 trick that lets you shut down your PC with a single click. Right-click onto an empty area of the desktop then select New and Shortcut. In the 'Type the Location' box enter the following:

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EXTERNAL LINKS

- Support - Poweroid.com
- International IT company database - Poweroid
- Drivers, driver downloads - Poweroid
- Support - Symantec
- Support - Microsoft
- Technical database (knowledge base) - Microsoft

"shutdown -s -t 00"(without the quotes), click the Next button, give it a name - such as "Shutdown" - and then click Finish.

The "-s" switch tells it to shut down just your computer and the "-t 01" command tells it to wait one second before switching off. If you do not enter a value it will default to a delay of 20 seconds.

If you are the only user of your computer then you are probably getting a bit tired of being asked for a password every time you switch it on, this next tip banishes the password request box for good.

Go to Run on the Start menu and type 'control userpasswords2' (without the quotes) then OK. Select your user name then uncheck the item 'Users must enter a user name and password.' then OK.

To finish off Go to Run on the Start menu again and this time enter 'control userpasswords' and select 'Change the way users log on or off' and make sure that both 'Use the Welcome Screen' and 'Use Fast User Switching' are unchecked.

Here is a quick way to switch off the annoying XP boot-up logo. Go to Run on the Start menu and type "msconfig" (without the quotes) then select the Boot.Ini tab and check the box marked "/NOGUIBOOT" then OK and reboot the PC. You will probably get a warning message that the computer is in Diagnostic Mode. This is perfectly okay and you can safely check the box that stops the message appearing every time.

The next group of tips are designed to curb some of XP's nagging ways. Your PC will constantly remind you to do things that you either don't want to do, or are perfectly capable of doing in your own good time. If you haven't disabled the password logon then you will find that XP will urge you to change your password every 14 days. You can turn this off and change your password (which you should still do, if you are sharing your PC) when it suits you by right clicking on My Computer.

Select Manage then double-click to expand 'Local Users and Groups' and click on Users. In the right-hand pane right-click on the User who's password you want to control then click Properties. This will bring up a dialogue box with the option 'Password never Expires', which you can check and then click Apply.

Every 60 days Windows XP offers to run a "Wizard" to clean up your desktop. Even if it's a complete shambles it is still your desktop and if you don't want to be tidied up just yet then right-click on the desktop select Properties and click the Desktop tab. Click the Customize button and deselect the item 'Run Desktop Cleanup' and click OK.

XP is set to regularly check for updates, which is fine if you have fast, always-on broadband, but it can be inconvenient for those using slower dial-up connections.

Of course, you should still download the updates, particularly the critical security patches, but to do it at a time of your choosing go to System in Control Panel or right-click My Computer and select Properties, and then the Automatic Update tab.

Under Notification Settings check 'Turn off Automatic Updating' and click OK. To check for updates manually open Internet Explorer and click Windows Update on the Tools menu.

The way Windows XP reports errors is basically a good idea but the offer to report a problem to Microsoft for the tenth time can become tedious when trying to install a difficult piece of software or awkward peripheral.

Error reporting is enabled by default but it's easy enough to turn off. Just right-click on My Computer then Properties and the Advanced tab. Select the Error Reporting tab and check the item 'Disable Error Reporting'.

Finally, new XP computers make a a nuisance of themselves by pestering you to register with Microsoft's Passport and Messenger services. These reminders should only appear 10 times but if you want to put a complete stop to it you need to edit an entry in the Registry.

It's not difficult and the XP Registry is very similar to those in Windows 9x. But this procedure is definitely not for novices and should only be attempted after the Registry has been safely backed up. Launch the registry editor by going to Run on the Start menu and type "regedit". Work your way to HKEY_CURRENT_USER/Software/Microsoft/Windows/CurrentVersion/Explorer/Advanced. Then right-click in the right pane, select New then DWORD Value. Rename it EnableBalloonTips, give it a value of 0 and exit Regedit.

Jargon filter

Msconfig
Microsoft Configuration utility - hidden feature in Windows used to control many behind-the-scenes operations

Registry
A large, constantly changing Windows System file containing details of how your PC is set up and configuration information for all the programs stored on the hard disk

Wizard
Simple helper program that starts whenever you begin a task

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Top tip

Did you know that Windows XP has a built in file compression utility?

If you are running out of room on your hard disk drive or you need to reduce the size of a file for emailing, simply open Windows

Explorer, right-click on the file, select Send To and then click Compressed (Zipped) Folder.

You can also create an automatic "compression" folder that will compress any file you copy or drag-and-drop into it. Right-click on an empty area of the desktop and click New, then Compressed (Zipped) Folder, and give the folder a suitable name.

Next week: Windows XP Tips, part 2