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Boot camp

Bootcamp 274: Windows XP Tips, part two
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COMPLETE BOOTCAMP ARCHIVE

Top traumas solved by Rick Maybury

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Here’s some more Windows XP tips and tricks, this week we’re concentrating on hidden features and facilities that improve security, make it more responsive and generally easier to use.

As with last week’s selection, most of these tweaks work with the Home and Pro versions of XP and they are all perfectly safe, though before changing any aspect of your PC’s configuration you should make sure that all of your important data files are safely backed up.

Windows XP stores shortcuts to all of the programs you’ve recently used in a folder called Prefetch. This isn’t routinely flushed so after a relatively short while it becomes cluttered and can even slow your PC down.

It’s a good idea therefore to clean it out every so often. To do that go to Run on the Start menu and type "prefetch" (as usual without the quotes) and an Explorer-type dialogue box will open. Press Ctrl A to highlight all of the shortcuts and hit the Delete key to zap them.

While we’re on Run on the Start menu, here’s a quick way to get to another of XP’s hidden features. Type "osk" and up pops a virtual on-screen keyboard. It is remarkably functional

EXTERNAL LINKS

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

with three typing modes.

By default, you can use the mouse to pointer and button to select characters but, if you go to the keyboard’s Setting menu and click Typing Mode, you can choose the "Hover" method, whereby characters are selected simply by pointing at them with the mouse, or you can use a joystick or "hot keys" to type.

Although not intended as a serious disability aid, it could come in useful if for some reason you can’t use a normal keyboard, or you could use it in an emergency if your normal keyboard develops a fault.

If you share your PC with others or you are using someone else’s computer and you don’t want others to see what you have been doing or you want to maintain your privacy you should enable a feature that automatically deletes usage stored in the "pagefile".

Go to Control Panel then Administrative Tools and double click Local Security Policy > Local Policies > Security Options. Scroll down the list in the right-hand pane and right click on "Shutdown: clear virtual Memory Pagefile", select Properties and check "Enabled" and then Apply.

Windows XP has a rather neat screensaver with a slideshow facility that automatically displays pictures stored on your PC.

To enable it, right-click on an empty area of the desktop, select Properties and then the Screensaver tab. Choose My Pictures Slideshow from the list and click Settings button and use Browse to point it towards the folder containing your images.

You can also change the timing interval, the size of the pictures and transition effects from this dialogue box.

Here is a quick and simple performance tweak that’s definitely worth trying on sluggish sub-1GHz PCs.

The idea is to turn off XP's unnecessary desktop animation and cosmetic features, without changing the overall look, so right-click on My Computer, select Properties > Advanced and click the Settings button.

Disable the following options from the list of Custom features:
Fade or slide menus into view;
Fade or slide ToolTips into view;
Fade out menu items after clicking Show Shadows under menus;
Slide open combo boxes Slide taskbar buttons;
Use a background image for each folder type;
Use common tasks in folders.
The Search facility in Windows XP has a couple of irritating features that you might want to switch off. The first is the animated dog.

To get rid of it, scroll down the list in the left hand Search pane to Change Preferences and click "Without animated character". It will then walk off the screen, hopefully never to be seen again.

The other annoyance is the mini-questionnaire that you have to complete, before it will let you search for a file. This is okay for absolute novices but a real time-waster for everyone else.

Go to Change Preferences again and this time click on "Change Files and Folders Search Behaviour" then select "Advanced - includes options to manually enter", and the Search window will return to the traditional layout.

If you are concerned about privacy then you should know that every time you use the Windows Media Player to play a CD it attempts to download information from the internet relating to the disc being played.

It also sends information about your PC to the site it is contacting. If you don't like the idea of your PC exchanging data without your knowledge or permission go to the Media Player

Tools menu and select Options and click the Player tab and uncheck the item "Allow Internet sites to Uniquely identify your player".

This last tip concerns a hidden utility that displays a variety of information about your PC and XP, including the time your system has been running since it was last booted up.

Go to Start > Programs > Accessories and click on Command Prompt to open a DOS type window, at the flashing cursor type "systeminfo" and all will be revealed.

If you want to keep a permanent record of this data type instead "systeminfo > info.txt" and this creates a text document in whatever directory you launched Systeminfo from.

Jargon filter

DOS
Disc Operating System, a program that runs independently of Windows using text-based commands.

Hot keys
Two or three key strokes activating command within program.

Pagefile
An area of hard disc memory used to store data used by the computer's temporary random access memory (RAM), including sensitive or private information such as unencrypted passwords.

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Top tip

Old hands will be familiar with Windows PowerToys, a useful set of tools developed by Microsoft that lets you change the way Windows 9x looks and works.

There's a set of PowerToys for XP including the essential Tweak UI utility. This has many configuration options including shortcut arrow removal and "Paranoia", which controls the way Windows stores information about what you do on your PC.

Tweak UI for XP and all of the other PowerToys are unsupported freeware and they can be found on the Microsoft web site, along with download and installation instructions at: http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/pro/downloads/powertoys.asp

- **Next week:** The good Google guide