

TECH

E-clutter

Your computer loves it – NOT

By Allison Stevens, Cox News Service

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DAYTON, Ohio – It seeps in from all angles, tainting the dark corners of your hard drive, spreading onto your desktop and oozing into your inbox.

It sounds like a disease, and it might as well be. Meet e-clutter.

It's the random Word documents multiplying across your computer's desktop, the 1,487 e-mails you haven't deleted, the disorganized digital photos piling up in your software and slowing your computer down.

Most e-clutter isn't toxic in small amounts, but with excess comes injury, and the buildup is raising larger concerns in the virtual world.

In its annual trend list, leading U.S. advertising firm JWT Worldwide cites "e-clutter (and e-clutter consultants)." as one of "80 Things to Watch in 2008."

The company's trendspotting department spent 2007 compiling the list, and this virtual mess made it past a global team of trend scouts, researchers and Ann Mack, the director of trendspotting at JWT.

"E-clutter is something that everyone inherently gets. We use our PC as a management unit to keep track of memories, finances, work-related material, entertainment – all on this one device," Mack said. "As a result, there's a lot of clutter on our desktops. ... I predict e-clutter consultants will emerge to help manage these problems in a more effective matter."

It's been a looming problem. In October 2003, Document magazine reported that 85 percent of the information that businesses need to operate isn't structured into databases or spreadsheets, forcing employees to spend roughly 30 percent of their time looking for the material they need to do their jobs.

Before JWT coined the term "e-clutter," Gary Rogoff, chief financial officer of Synthesis Administrative Support in Overland Park, Kan., was addressing the problem with his clients.

His December article on Synthesis' Web site shows how to clear e-clutter by following simple maintenance procedures he learned from his information technology subcontractors.

The problem with going to IT firms for e-clutter diagnostics is that many can provide in-depth technical assistance but don't possess the organization skills to help everyday users with more simple ailments. Professional organizers can help here, but even they don't cure computer woes completely.

E-clutter presents ethical boundaries for professional organizers, said Vicki Norris, founder and president of Restoring Order in Portland, Ore., a professional organizer and regular featured expert on HGTV's "Mission Organization." Most organizers are not IT experts and do not want to be held liable if files are lost.

The result is not as in-depth technical support as you might like. Instead, Norris emphasizes carrying simple, customized filing systems over from the real world into the virtual one.

"E-clutter is a huge issue," Norris said. "People get really overwhelmed because they have to organize their real and virtual worlds. Now they have two problems."

But what treatments can we use while we wait for the tech-savvy e-clutter consultants to materialize from a list of predictions? Experts and everyday people recommend targetting these trouble spots.

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Desktop

Start with the first thing you see when you flip open your laptop; for many of us, it's chaos.

"It's too easy to save everything to the desktop," said Scott Sapcariu, a junior at Berklee College of Music in Boston. "The cool picture you set up as your background is all covered in random files. Sometimes I save stuff, but don't really pay attention to where I save it."

It's a common problem for many people, Norris said.

"That's the hidden poison of the electronic world," she said. "It's so easy to save things."

She recommends employing her "pruning principle." – regularly deleting files and applications that you don't need anymore.

After you've pruned, Norris said to figure out a filing system that works for you and stick to it. Create a folder for everything: medical, financial, household, personal, photo and music documents.

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Music

As a music business major at Berklee, you can only imagine how many music files Sapcariu houses on his Mac.

"I never usually get around to organizing all of it," he said. "But I put my music on a separate hard drive, and I try to make sure everything is labeled properly. I pretty much organize it by artist."

Hard drives are where computers store data – all computers have an internal one, but external ones are available when your internal one runs out of room.

For the music-obsessed, an external hard drive such as Sapcariu's is a good option for extra storage space. This gives your computer more room for other files, allowing it to run faster. They can be relatively inexpensive, with some starting below \$100.

If you only have a few hundred songs on your computer, your internal hard drive should suffice. iTunes automatically creates artist and album folders when you import music to keep things organized, but if music files aren't ending up where they belong, make sure the "Keep iTunes Music Folder Organized" box is checked under your iTunes preferences.

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Document folders

After de-cluttering the desktop, you need places to put the stuff you keep. Start in your "Documents." folder.

"You really need to customize if you want a system to do well and last," Norris said.

Color-coding and categorization are techniques that work for most people. Norris recommends using six or seven colors or categories or you won't be able to remember the system. Divide your documents into folders by topic, giving them descriptive names. Matching categories with colors solidifies the system.

The same goes for digital photos. Take the files off your desktop and place them in your photo software folders.

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E-mail and Web

Use Norris' organizing and pruning principles online, too. Mack cites cluttered inboxes as a significant issue.

"Most people aren't superefficient in how they manage their offline clutter, and this is it moved online," she said.

To keep your e-mail under control, follow daily maintenance procedures similar to those you use offline – file incoming e-mail into folders immediately and delete messages you don't want. If you get tons of spam, divert it to a separate e-mail account. See if you can get your inbox down to empty every day.

Keep your favorite Web sites and bookmarks under control, too. If you marked a page for a project and don't use it anymore, remove it.