How to get rid of e-clutter

Coping with digital debris is challenging at best, but organization is a key part of the solution

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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 all of 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 says. "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, CFO of Synthesis Administrative Support in Overland Park, Kan., was addressing the problem with his clients.

His December 2007 article on Synthesis' Web site shows how to clear e-clutter by following simple maintenance procedures he learned from his IT 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.

Professional organizer Vicki Norris, founder and president of Restoring Order in Portland, Ore., and regular featured expert on HGTV's "Mission Organization," says that e-clutter presents ethical boundaries for professional organizers — most 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 says. "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 to everyday folks recommend the following.

Desktop

You might as well start with the first thing you see when you flip open your laptop and for many of us, it's chaos.

"It's too easy to save everything to the desktop," says 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 says.

"That's the hidden poison of the electronic world," she says. "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 says 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.

Document folders

After de-cluttering your 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 says.

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.

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 says. "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 like 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.

Norris' principles apply here too – if you don't listen to that Kiss CD anymore, delete it. If you do, make sure it's in the "Kiss" folder.

E-mail and Internet

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 says.

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.

Hard drive

We know that the hard drive is where your computer houses all the information you accumulate, so you need to keep it healthy and e-clutter-free. De-cluttering Synthesis' computers is a routine Rogoff has always gone through.

"People wonder why their computer is slowing down and it's because there's all this stuff they haven't taken care of," he says. "It's just one of those things that needs to be done, like maintenance on a car. You have this equipment and you need to treat it with respect."

For him, "respect" includes continuous desktop, document and music organization, as well as emptying your computer's trash or recycle bin (which de-clutters your hard drive). But his routine extends to the more technical side of the virtual world, too. Every time you visit a Web site it creates temporary Internet files on your computer. As they add up, your computer slows down. Deleting these files speeds up your computer and clears space for other files. Defragmenting your computer will also fix these issues.

A consistent crusade

Rogoff and Norris stress that e-clutter is manageable on your own — it just needs to be dealt with daily.

Norris recommends purchasing a binder to store hard copies of your computer manuals and passwords. For her, controlling e-clutter is an issue of consistent self-observation.

"Be a detective about what doesn't work for you," she says. "Find what's broken and decide how to fix it."