Radio Days – 2013-05-18

Tip of the Week – Old Versions of Windows

During the week I was asked to install an old computer in a client's office: it was needed because the business had expanded so they had to employ a new person in the office. There was a brand-new second-hand computer sitting in the office: it had been there for at least a year because there was a clean part of the carpet where the dust had not managed to settle.

I started the computer and found that it was running Windows 98!

Now Windows 98 was relegated to end-of-life on 30 June 2006, nearly seven years ago! This, of course, means that no program created after then (like Office 2010) will run on Windows 98 because it is so different from its successor, Windows XP. Old versions of Windows are now of historical interest only: please do not use them for anything important like your business.

The Ripple Effect

Once Microsoft has declared that a version of Windows has reached the end of its life, the company will no longer provide support. Sales would have been stopped some years before so no new copies of that version of Windows will have been available from Microsoft, though some people may have an old copy that they can sell.

Once Microsoft has declared that it will no longer provide support for a version of Windows there is a ripple (or domino) effect as other software and hardware suppliers drop support for their products which run on that old version of Windows.

This is one reason for getting a new computer every few years: support for your old computer will drop off. It is only independent support people, not the major companies, who may remember how to use these old versions of programs. Thus, if you rely on your computer for your business, or for any other reason, then it is in your interest to keep your version of Windows up to date.

Keeping up to date with your Windows version will usually mean that you need to get a new computer. This is because new versions of Windows, especially when you jump a number of versions, need much more powerful hardware than the older version.

For example, Windows 98 will run quite well on an Intel Celeron chip with 24 MB RAM and a 2 GB hard disc! By today's standards these figures are laughable (in fact, you could not buy a computer with these specifications because the hardware is no longer sold) and this hardware will not run new programs like Office 2010.

I checked the Microsoft website for these specifications and they suggested that you have a 14.4 kbps modem for your internet access. This, too, is slow: everybody now is eligible for satellite internet at a speed of at least 16 Mbps: this is more than 1,000 times faster than that recommended by Microsoft.

A new computer bought today will have an Intel i3, i5 or i7 chip with at least 2 GB RAM (usually at least 4 GB RAM) and about 500 GB of hard disc. These specifications are so far beyond those for a Windows 98 computer that I find it hard to imagine that, at one time, I thought that a Windows 98 computer was fast!

One other matter which makes Windows 98 obsolete is the USB system. This system was just coming into existence at the time that Windows 98 was released. This means that Windows 98 does not have native support for any USB drive: all drives released while Windows 98 was king needed to have a CD or floppy disc with the driver for that device. Windows XP and later versions have built-in support for USB drives so the lack of support in Windows 98 is no longer a problem.

When you get rid of your old computer please donate them to your local recycling centre.

Using the Correct Program Well

During this week I have watched two clients at work. One client was using Excel without being aware of its capabilities; the other was using Word as a page layout program.

Using Excel Badly

Excel is Microsoft's spreadsheet program. It is used to calculate and manipulate numbers. It was also the first the first program which was used to justify the purchase of personal computers for business use. Before spreadsheets, accountants used to use large sheets of paper divided into squares. They would write numbers in the squares then do all the calculations by hand.

My client was using Excel. He was using it to create a cash-flow forecast and budget for his family. He entered all the number in each of the squares then took out his calculator and worked out all the calculations by hand. Worse, he got many of them wrong!

Excel has many ways of doing calculations which make the job of the user easier.

I tried to tell him that he could get Excel to add the total of a column of figures and do it more quickly and more accurately than his calculator. He doubted that a mere computer program could do that. I made a bet with him: I could make changes in a spreadsheet and get Excel to calculate the correct answer before he could do it with his calculator. He took the bet!

I then started a new spreadsheet and entered his numbers into the cells which he told me to use. He calculated his total; I used a formula to calculate my total. I changed three of his numbers then, before he could calculate the new total, I showed him Excel's total in the spreadsheet. He was amazed!

He was completely unaware that the program could do such useful things!

There was more! One of the features of a cash-flow forecast and budget is that the resulting balance at the end of each month can be copied to the opening balance for the beginning of the next month. This is a simple matter of copying the contents of one cell to another cell.

Just this one piece of information saved my client many anxious moments and also made his spreadsheet more accurate. His wife came up with extra items of expenditure which he had not considered and I was able to show him how to add items to his spreadsheet.

The next step was to all for the entry of actual figures as well as budgets. This meant that the details which his wife had carefully kept over the last six months were able to be entered into his spreadsheet. For this to be successful I had to teach my client how to insert columns, how to insert rows, how to copy the contents of one cell to another and how to total a number of cells (both down a column and across a row). This was a lot for one person to remember.

My client got plenty of practice doing his family's budget and I earned a kiss from his wife!

Apparently he had been trying to get the family finances in order (under strict instructions from his wife!) for some time now and had always got the whole thing wrong each time. Now, knowing how to use Excel better, he and his wife and family had a much better knowledge of their finances.

Using Word as a Page-Layout Program

Microsoft Word is a word processing program. Unfortunately, a decade or two ago, Microsoft decided to promote Word as a program which could do all sorts of things like create good-looking pages.

My client had believed the hype and had decided to write a book which would make much of his knowledge available to the whole wide world. This endeavour meant that he had to load his pages with images. These images were both photos and screen-shots from his computer.

Word worked well for the first hundred or so images. After that the whole process began to go down the drain. I explained that for many years Word had had difficulty in handling a large number of images, and that the best way of doing this was with a page-layout program. I suggested that he use Publisher, Microsoft's page-layout program.

Because he had the full version of Office he already had a copy of Publisher. This meant that we could start using it straight away. I showed him how to create a new Publisher document, then I wanted to show him how to insert the text from his Word document.

First we had to remove all the images from the Word document. They were already stored on his computer so there was no suggestion that these images would be lost for ever. Now we were ready to insert the text into the Publisher document. This is easy because the two programs are designed to work together. The text automatically inserted new pages as needed and the whole process was automatic.

Next we had to insert the images. This was done one image at a time because Publisher, like Word, needs to know where each image is to be placed. After he had inserted an image he noticed that Publisher needed to have another page created to hold the text displaced by the image. I showed him how to do this.

Then the next step was to insert some more images and make sure that the position of each image on the page was correct. Again, some more pages had to be created to hold the newly-displaced text. This my client was able to do with very little help.

He was learning quickly!

The next step was to insert a section so that the title page and the contents could be set so that there was no page number on the title page, the contents page and the foreword had page numbers in Roman numerals (i, ii iii, iv, v, vi, etc) with the remaining pages numbered using Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, etc).

Again, like so many things, this is easy when you know how.

My client was amazed at just how easy and consistent it was to insert images into a Publisher document when compared with inserting them into a Word document! This, of course, is because Word is a word processing program whereas Publisher is a page-layout program: they are as alike as chalk and cheese!

Summary

The main things to take away from this article are:

- Knowing how to use a program correctly will save you time and money. Excel is much better and quicker at doing calculations than the average person. Of course, if you are a maths genius, you may be able to do a better job but I doubt it!
- Knowing which program to use to accomplish a given task will make your life much easier. Word is an excellent program for creating documents of words while Publisher is much better at laying pages out, especially if they are full of images.

Further Information

Nothing this week

