Light Housekeeping for a Safe and Healthy Computer

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The Front Range PC Users Group (FRPCUG) provides free computer help to the community and to several other local non-profit organizations. As a result of these efforts, we have concluded that there are two tasks and several free and reliable utilities that help to maintain a safe and healthy computer.

Without a doubt, the two most important safety and security tasks for every Windows computer user are:

1. Keep the Operating System up to date
2. Keep the security software up to date

In addition to those two tasks, there is some computer "housekeeping" required to keep your computer healthy (for those of you who consider yourselves not knowledgeable enough to "maintain" your computer, think of these utilities as cleaning tools, not maintenance tools).

For housekeeping, these utilities are recommended:

1. Revo Uninstaller

This free utility does an excellent job of uninstalling unwanted software—even better than the Windows utility.

You can use the default settings of Revo.

It is important to note that Revo first runs the uninstaller program provided with the program you want to remove. At the end of that process, you are asked if you want to restart your computer. At this point, DO NOT RESTART YOUR COMPUTER. Click on "No" or "Restart later" (or whatever similar message is displayed). That will allow the rest of Revo to run. It will check for left-over files in the Windows Registry and the directories. Whatever files or file remnants it finds, select everything it finds and delete them.

You can download Revo from http://www.revouninstaller.com/revo_uninstaller_free_download.html. The free version is the one in the left column (see the graphic at right).

When installing this (or any program), proceed carefully, because very likely there is additional software "bundled" with what you want—that additional software is usually unnecessary. Examine each screen as it is displayed and uncheck or refuse any of the extra unwanted software.

Sometimes, even Revo needs some help. When combined with a registry cleaner, unwanted software can be effectively removed. The registry cleaner we recommend is:

2. CCleaner

This is another free, excellent utility. There is much debate in the computer world about registry cleaners. Since the Windows Registry is so crucial to correct operation, one viewpoint is that no one but an expert should use them. It is true that modifying the Windows Registry has the potential to create problems. However, those of us in FRPCUG have used CCleaner on many computers without problems. When using the registry cleaner option of CCleaner, you will be asked if you want to backup your registry. It's a safety factor that is up to you.

There are two parts to cleaning your computer of unwanted/left-over junk using CCleaner: Cleaner and Registry. Use both—once a week is recommended, but at least once a month.

There are cases where, after running Revo, it may be necessary to run CCleaner 3 or 4 times before all of the junk is removed. For example, if you have Norton security software installed on your computer and want to remove it, it will take Revo and possibly 3 or 4 passes of CCleaner (restarting your computer after each CCleaner run) to completely remove the Norton software (more on Norton in a moment).

You can download CCleaner from http://www.filehippo.com/download_ccleaner/. Use the "Download Latest Version" button with the green background at the right side of the page.

For computer security:

Virtually all new Windows computers are delivered with a trial version of one brand or another of security software installed, usually good for up to 90 days. Once that trial is over, you need to pay for an annual subscription for updates.

In today's world, there is no need to pay for security software. There are a number of excellent, free security software programs available. And, there are cases where the
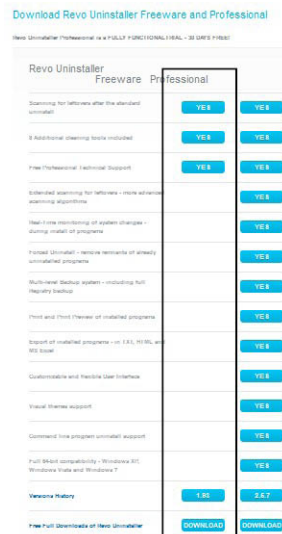
free software might actually be better than security software that you buy. For example, in the past, Norton security software acquired a reputation for slowing down the computers on which it was installed (my own experience with Norton software—at least the older versions, based on helping other computer users, is that it is not as good at catching malicious software (malware) as other programs).

Of the many free security software applications available, FRPCUG members have used these four, and found them to be reliable and effective (just because the software is free does not mean it is less capable):

One is Microsoft Security Essentials (MSE). You can download MSE from http://www.microsoft.com/download/en/details.aspx?id=5201. Note that there are 2 versions available, depending on whether your computer has an AMD or an Intel processor.

Another is Avira Free. This application received excellent reviews from the independent security software testing organization, AV-Comparatives - Independent Tests of Anti-Virus Software, http://www.av-comparatives.org/

A third choice is Avast Free, and a fourth choice is AVG Free. We suggest you read the reviews on these products (enter: review of—and the application name—into a Google search, or use the AV Comparitives website mentioned above). If you decide to use one these applications, download it from http://www.filehippo.com. You are less likely to encounter excess, unnecessary additional software (sometimes called "bloatware" or "sneakware"). Once you connect to the filehippo website, just enter the name of the application into the search box.

Another area of debate regarding security software is the number of different security software applications that should be installed and running and one computer. With one exception, described below, you are probably going to be better off with only one. Since these applications are always running (in the background), it is very likely that two or more security applications running simultaneously will cause conflicts (and/or slow down your computer). It is possible, with a lot of experimentation, to find multiple security applications that do not conflict (one FRPCUG member has done so), but for most computer users, one application is sufficient.

The best way to change security software is to download, but don't install, the new security software. Then use Revo (and if necessary, CCleaner) to remove the old security software. Finally, install the new security software.

A supplementary security software program that works extremely well is Malwarebytes. You can download this program from http://www.filehippo.com/search?q=malwarebytes. The free version does not run continuously in the background, as do other security software applications. That means Malwarebytes does not conflict with any other security software. The only disadvantage to this program is that you have to remember

to run a manual scan (say once a week). It's worth it—Malwarebytes finds problems other security software does not.

The best way to keep your computer secure, as mentioned above, is to keep the operating system and security software up to date. You can set Windows computers for automatic operating system updates. Virtually all security software programs, including the free ones can be set up for automatic updates.

For more information on this topic, connect to http://frpcug.org/presentations/BB_Present04.pdf and http://frpcug.org/presentations/comp_maint_security.pdf.

One other suggestion:

Another free, useful utility is Belarc Advisor. The program provides a detailed list of the hardware installed in your computer. You can download Belarc Advisor from http://www.belarc.com/free_download.html. While not crucial, like security software and maintenance utilities, Belarc is a helpful program to have on your computer.

We have installed and run these programs on many computers without any problems. There is, however, always the chance that some unusual combination of hardware and software may result in a problem. So you should backup at the very least your important data, even if it is just copying that data temporarily to a flash drive. Please read our disclaimer at http://www.frpcug.org/k-byte/current.pdf (page 19).

Happy Computing!