

Computer slowing down?

This is one of the great mysteries of computing for many of us, why does my computer get slower and slower over time? This happens to almost all of us, be it a PC or a Mac, and can be rather frustrating when you have seemingly done nothing to produce such a drop in performance.

To start there is a myth regarding the amount of files you have on your computer. In general, if you have at least 3-4 gigs of hard disk space left, then your system should not suffer as a result of there not being much room left on the hard drive – most PCs I come across are typically 20-40% full, and rarely more. Though it is always a good idea to go through your files to clear out the old unwanted stuff, don't force yourself to do this and expect the PC to run faster – it may, but it is unlikely.

The most likely reason for your computer to run slower over the time is Security software. As you are aware, not only does the security software download upgrades regularly, but when your subscription expires and you upgrade to the new version, you are typically installing a much heavier application with many additional features. Obviously this has its benefits in terms of security, but it also loads more demanding software (that is permanently running in the background) onto your unchanged machine, resulting in a drop in performance.

Spyware is also a likely cause of drops in performance, as this software installs itself without you knowing, and runs in the background permanently drawing on system resources. This is similar for certain viruses, and of course you thus need efficient security software running, beginnings of a vicious circle.....

Other possibilities include the applications running in your system tray (little toolbar in the bottom right of your screen with a variety of Icons showing on a PC) which are started automatically by Windows when you boot up. Some are required, while others are probably not needed until you wish to actually use the specific application. For instance if you use Skype, but make 1 call every few weeks with it and never receive calls, then there is no point in Skype running and being online as soon as your computer is on. Therefore open the application, find the options/preferences page and un-tick the box that says “Start Skype when I start Windows....”

Finally, still on the software side, over time there are many updates to the system, updates to various pieces software, plug-ins etc, and as a result software is installed, removed and modified. However this software always leaves behind unwanted files and Registry keys (Windows registry is the heart of the system, and accumulates over time many unwanted “Registry Keys”) that eventually slow down the system. There are applications such as Registry Mechanic, that theoretically clean up Windows registry for you, but results vary from huge increases in performance to total system failure. I personally do not use such software and would advise you to only consider using it as a last resort, and if you have all your files backed up.

As far as the hardware is concerned, there are a variety of problems that can occur that will slow the system down. Firstly dirt and dust – over time your computer will suck in dust as the internal fans spin in order to cool down the machine. This dust slowly covers the fans resulting in inefficient cooling and poorer system performance.

If it's a desktop, then access is easier (I am not suggesting you do this unless you are confident you know what you are doing) and if it's a laptop, then it certainly is a little harder, but making the machine breath better allows the processor to run at optimum temperature and thus performance.

Occasionally your computer can have what is called "Bad RAM". RAM is the memory your computer uses to run the system and applications, the more you have, the better (anyone running 256 MB of RAM and Windows XP will have performance problems and would best upgrade the RAM by adding at least a further 512 MB of RAM). When you develop bad RAM, usually your system will slow considerably and result in crashes, blue screens, but can easily be rectified by replacing the bad RAM. Most computers will have come with hardware diagnostics software, just run it and you should be told whether the RAM is defective.

Finally, another common reason for poor system performance is the beginnings of Hard Drive failure. Booting problems, errors reading files, additional mechanical noise from the computer are all symptoms that the HD may be on its last legs – BACK UP NOW. Hard drives can easily be replaced, but the data is usually lost forever, so please backup your files (though you are certainly already doing this regularly.....)

There is only 1 guaranteed way to improve the performance of your computer if it is the software that is slowing it down – re-install the system ensuring you reformat the hard drive in the process, and it should run as fast as it did the day you bought it. However, over the last few months I have come across several cases of HD failure as a result of upgrading or re-installing the system - this may happen if the HD was going to fail anyway, but it is fairly unlikely.

So the best way to improve your computers performance is to back up all your data and re-install the system. If the computer still runs badly then there is a hardware problem, and then it is probably best to leave that to a professional.

For computer problems and advice, please contact: Edward on 06 26 98 03 12 or by email on ed@emarshall.fr All previous VVV Computer articles can be found at www.emarshall.fr