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Saving Time With Technology

Six New Year's Resolutions To Increase Productivity In 2004

by Wendy Gauntt

The promise of technology sounds wonderful: use your computer to work smarter, not harder...get more done in less time...get organized and stay organized.

But are you seeing these results in your own life and business? If not, the following tips will help you start the New Year right...here are six resolutions to help you save time with computer technology.

1. Find Files Faster

How much time do you waste looking for old files? Maybe you want to re-use a document to save work; maybe you need to look up some client information. Regardless, if you can't find what you need electronically, you either do without, recreate it, or end up sorting through paper files to find a hard copy. There are better ways...

The Quick Fix: Use descriptive file names on all your documents. Compare the document name "proposal," with a more explanatory name like "website proposal for client xyz." Which one will mean more to you three months down the road?

And, if down the road you brain lock on your descriptive file name, Windows makes it easy to do a search. Put in the word "website" or the client's name in the search option and Windows will find all documents with those names in the file title line. On most computers, you can find the Windows search on your Start Menu. If you have any trouble with it, click on the Help Menu.

Even Better: The search feature is great, but it does take a little time, especially on older, slower computers. It's still important to use descriptive file names, but it's even better to organize your files into electronic file folders. In the "My Documents" folder, I have created folders for my personal information and for my

business. Within my business folder, I have folders for finance, marketing, and clients. The client folder is further broken down, with one folder for each client. I've organized my paper files in much the same way, for consistency. Now all of my documents—paper or electronic—are immediately sorted into the right place so that I can retrieve them quickly the next time I need them.

2. Unclutter Your Email

Anyone else having trouble with email overload? I get over 100 emails almost every day, and while many are spam or ads, I do have to read and respond to many of them. So how do I keep up?

Quick Fix: Keep your inbox clear of everything but messages you need to handle. First, immediately delete emails whenever possible. Second, use mail folders to organize the emails you want to keep. Third, create a folder for email that you don't need, but don't want to delete—YET. I move email to this folder to get it out of my inbox, and then I delete everything in that folder after about a month.

Even Better: With sophisticated email programs like Microsoft Outlook, you can set up mail "rules" to automatically process your email. For example, I have certain emails delivered to a folder I set up for informational emails, like newsletters. This way, I can browse them at my leisure, without cluttering my inbox.

I also use email flags—available in Outlook 2002 and newer versions—to color code important emails. I flag urgent messages in red so that I can easily prioritize my follow-ups.

Lastly, about once a month, I take an hour to review and delete as many old messages as possible, including those I've sent. To make it faster, I sort the emails by person, so that I process all communications to and from that person at once. Uncluttering your email makes

searches faster and helps the performance of your email program.

3. Categorize Your Contacts

Are you making the most of your contact list? Keeping up with friends and colleagues? You've got the information...you might as well use it.

Quick Fix: In your address book, set up email lists to people you want to contact regularly. I have set up a number of lists, for groups like family, friends, business partners, and my network of contacts. It makes it very easy to send out news and updates to the right people.

Even Better: Categorize your contacts and learn how to do a mail merge. If you have assigned categories to your contacts, it takes just a few steps to create individual customized letters and envelopes. Would you rather receive a letter addressed to you personally, or a generic form letter? With advanced software, you can create personalized emails as well.

4. Clean Off Your Desktop

How many icons are sitting on your desktop, unused? Nearly every software installation adds to the clutter on your desktop, but the only ones that need to be there are the ones you use regularly. All the rest can be found on your Start Menu.

Quick Fix: Go to your desktop and delete every shortcut icon, the ones with a small arrow on the bottom left, that you haven't used in the last month. These are safe to delete, because the program stays on your computer and is accessible through the Start Menu. If you have file folders or documents sitting on your desktop, don't delete them, instead move them to your "My Documents" folder to clean things up.

Even Better: There are a couple more places that are convenient locations for your program icons. One is your taskbar, usually at the

bottom or the right of your screen. You can drag icons to an area next to the start button, and these stay accessible all the time, even when you are using other programs. I have Outlook and Internet Explorer on this bar because I use these two programs the most. You can also add programs to the top of your Start Menu. This saves the time it would take to browse through the Program list.

5. SurfSwiftly: Set Up Your Website Favorites

Do you spend much time on the Internet? Hate typing all those addresses? Spend a few minutes setting up your favorites and re-ar-

ranging your toolbars so that you can point and click instead.

Quick Fix: Check out the Favorites Menu in Internet Explorer (or Bookmarks, if you use Netscape). There are probably a lot of websites listed that you have never visited. Get rid of these, and add all the ones you do visit.

Even Better: Figure out which four or five sites you visit most frequently, and add them to the Links Toolbar (or the Personal Toolbar in Netscape) at the top of the browser screen. And for speedy and comprehensive Internet searches, check out Google's free toolbar addition at toolbar.google.com.

6. Learn Something New

All of us have frustrations with technology...what's yours? Since frustrations can consume a lot of time and energy, my final suggestion is: pick one and find a solution to the problem. You may have to ask for help or spend a little time learning something new, but the reward will be worth it—new-found progress and productivity.

Happy New Year!

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