

Radio Days – 2012-04-14

Tip of the Week – Write It Down!

A client had a problem with their QuickBooks data file. During a rebuild a message came up with details about the problem and the owner said that she would remember it. The next morning, when she rang me, she could not remember what the message was. Normally this would not be a major problem but this time it was.

The reason for the problem is simple: because they have a large data file it takes about four hours (yes, that is FOUR HOURS!!) to do a backup: and even longer if you verify the data file before the backup. For this reason the verification had not been done for some time. Now was the time to pay the price.

The price? Another four hours to do a backup, and this had to be followed by a rebuild. This made for a long night as nothing could be done during the working day.

Please remember the old Chinese saying: *The faintest ink lasts longer than the strongest memory.*

This Goes With That!

One subject that rears its head every so often is how to classify programs into types and what each type does. This usually starts with the suggestion that a client stops using Internet Explorer (perhaps because it is so slow or because it has acquired too many toolbars) and uses an easier, faster and safer web browser. Often this suggestion has been prompted by my client's discovery that half his screen has been taken up with toolbars which serve no useful purpose. When the loss of half his screen is pointed out a client will usually state that he or she did not do it. We now know that computers have fairies at the bottom of the garden!

The next thing that I hear the inevitable question: "What is a web browser?"

It is at this stage that I wish that more people had some idea of what types of programs exist and what each one does. Let's start with a list of the sorts of things that people do with their computers. Of course, many of these tasks could, just as easily, be done with pencil and paper rather than with a computer, but I am talking about computers so I choose to ignore pencil and paper.

- Browse the internet
- Send and receive emails
- Keep track of finances
- Write letters or the Great Australian Novel
- Keep track of birthdays
- Keep track of appointments
- Burning optical discs

Just as some tools can have many uses (you can use a hammer to nail nails, and you can also use it to break tiles and windows) so many programs can have many uses. I remember when I was teaching computing in Melbourne some twenty years ago I had a class of people who wanted to learn how to use Lotus 1-2-3.

I asked each person what they expected to learn from the class, and one student said that he wanted to learn how to use Lotus 1-2-3 to write letters. Now this program is a spreadsheet, so is used to do calculations. Often these are financial calculations such as calculating budgets. It can also be used to keep track of birthdays and appointments, and many people use a spreadsheet to keep track of their finances.

However, for writing letters, there is a much better program: this is the word processor. Most people nowadays use Word for writing letters, but in those early days there were far more

word processors in use. My favourite word processor at that time was WordPerfect: it had far more useful features than all other word processors.

My next job was to convince my student that he would not learn how to use this program to write letters: if he wanted to learn how to write letters he would find that WordPerfect was a much better program for that task.

Let's take a look at the tasks that people want to do on their computer and the programs which they can use to do tasks.

Browse the Internet

One of the most common tasks for most people is browsing the internet. The program used for this is a web browser, and there are five programs in this group in common use. These programs are, in alphabetical order:

- Chrome
- Firefox
- Internet Explorer
- Opera
- Safari

I have included web addresses for four of these web browsers. The fifth browser, Internet Explorer, comes with Windows. This means that it is on your Windows computer whether you want it or not. It is the slowest and most easily hacked web browser so I recommend that you only use it for the sites which, stupidly, will only work with Microsoft's web browser.

All the other web browsers are better than Internet Explorer, which comes with Windows and is renowned as the most effective way to get a virus because its security holes are so well known. I recommend that you get at least one other browser and try it out. My favourites are Firefox and Opera.

Send and Receive Emails

One of the most common uses for the internet is sending and receiving emails. There are many programs for this task, and they can be divided into two classes: those which use a web browser to access the emails and those which use an emailing program.

- **Web Mail:** if you have an email account with a provider like *Gmail* or *Hotmail* you will use a web browser to send and receive your emails. This is a very common form of email program, especially for children and those who travel a lot.
- **Emailing program:** there are many emailing programs. Perhaps the best known, for people who use Windows XP, is *Outlook Express*. This is still my favourite email program, but Microsoft has disbanded the OE team and no other company has come to the rescue of the many millions of people who want OE back.

There are other emailing programs available on the internet. Perhaps one of the most used (and my current program) is Outlook: often provided as part of Microsoft Office. Another good email program is *Thunderbird* from the people who make the Firefox browser. Thunderbird, like Firefox, is a free download.

There are, of course, many other email programs. A web search will turn up many, some free and some for payment, usually with a trial period. Something to watch for is that you can import your old emails into your new program, if you are one of those people who keeps old emails.

Keep track of finances

There are many programs to help you keep track of your finances. Some of them are free but most require payment. They vary in quality from poor to excellent and, if you need one for business purposes, I suggest that you use one which has support from independent people who will setup your company file then show you how to use the program to best advantage.

Despite advertising which states that these programs are easy to setup and use, I find that most people manage to get to the stage where they need professional help sooner or later, even if they do not realise this need for some time.

Sometimes paying for good help is the cheapest option in the long run. This applies very strongly to your accounting program, which has the potential to help your business become more profitable more quickly with better information.

Because there are so many programs I will only mention the two that I support: QuickBooks and MYOB.

Keep track of people and events

Many people use a program to keep track of events like birthdays and addresses. There are many programs which will do this work, but one of the most popular is the spreadsheet which comes with your office suite. For most people this is Excel. Excel is an excellent program for keeping lists, especially as you can sort by any column (like date or name).

For many others, especially those who need to be able to collaborate with others, an online program can be the best option. Again, there are many online programs by many companies. Some of these are free and some need to be paid for: all of them need an internet connection to be able to work.

Perhaps the best of the free spreadsheets is OpenOffice and its offshoot, LibreOffice. There is an interesting story behind this pair: OpenOffice started the whole process as a reaction to the high price of Microsoft Office. There were then reports of OpenOffice stagnating so some of the people working on it started a new version called LibreOffice (*libre* is the French word for free). It now seems that both projects are going full steam ahead as both websites look fresh.

The spreadsheet offering from both of these organisations is called *Calc*. Both programs come as a complete office suite containing:

- **Writer:** a word processor competent enough for most users.
- **Calc:** a spreadsheet which will do more than most people can use.
- **Impress:** a presentation program which rivals PowerPoint.
- **Draw:** a drawing program for your latest artwork.
- **Base:** a database program for storing and retrieving structured data.

You can easily download these suites from the websites given at the end of this cheat sheet. Please note that they are quite large so will take some hours over a dialup internet but only about an hour or two over a broadband (ADSL, satellite or wireless) connection.

If downloading such a large file seems too much please try one of the cheap office suites which are available both online and at many computer shops. A company from which I have bought excellent software before is Ashampoo. They have an office suite which may suit many users, and at \$60 it is much cheaper than the cheapest Microsoft suite.

Write letters or the Great Australian Novel

One of the most-used class of program is the word processor. The main word processor in use today is Word. This program has become the de facto standard, but it is by no means the only word processing program available. Like spreadsheets, both LibreOffice and OpenOffice have a word processor, *Writer*, and this is more than enough for most people's needs.

If you intend to buy Microsoft's word processor please note that the cheapest way to buy it is in a package with other programs. There are a number of packages available so work out which programs you need and ensure that you get the package which contains all those programs.

The list of office suites and their programs is:

	Office Home & Student	Office Home & Business	Office Professional
Word	•	•	•
Excel	•	•	•
PowerPoint	•	•	•
OneNote	•	•	•
Outlook		•	•
Access			•
Publisher			•

If you are intending to buy a copy of one of these Microsoft Office suites please make sure that you buy the academic version: this version is identical to the full version but at a much lower price.

Burning optical discs

Many people routinely copy or burn CDs and DVDs. There are many programs which do this job but, for my money, the free Ashampoo Burning program beats all the others hands down. If you have specialised needs then this may not be the best for you but, for the vast majority of us the Ashampoo Burning Free is the ideal tool: easy to use and easy to download.

Further Information

Chrome	www.google.com/chrome
Firefox	www.mozilla.org
Opera	www.opera.com
Safari	www.apple.com/safari
Thunderbird	www.mozilla.org/thunderbird
QuickBooks	www.quicken.com.au
MYOB	www.myob.com.au
LibreOffice	www.libreoffice.org
OpenOffice	www.openoffice.org
Ashampoo	www.ashampoo.com