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Timesaving Tech Tools

The Well-Equipped Desktop

by Wendy Gauntt

Ah, the promise of technology: a paperless office, more free time, higher productivity. Yeah, right! We're all working harder and using more paper than ever. Although the paperless office has never materialized, technology has brought us many timesaving innovations. Here are some of the best.

Bars And Widgets

Are you on information overload? The Google Sidebar, part of the Google Desktop (<http://desktop.google.com>), will keep information handy and organized. The Sidebar stays in view alongside everything else on your computer screen. You can pick and choose the information you want—news, sports, weather, even your daily horoscope. And the blindingly fast and thorough Google Desktop search puts the built-in Windows search to shame. Yahoo! Widgets (<http://widgets.yahoo.com>) play a similar role, but you can load widgets individually and dock them anywhere on your screen. They even have virtual post-it notes. But watch out that you don't waste more time than you save, with addictive games like Sudoku and bouncy ball.

An End To Card-Shuffling

Do you have a stack of business cards on your desk, waiting to be entered into your computer? Maybe you shuffle through a file of cards each time you need a phone number. Toss those piles and save the tedious typing—get a business card scanner instead. These smart devices read contact info directly off the business card and enter it in your electronic address book, cleverly sorting out the name, the address, the office phone, etc. The accuracy is remarkable, better and faster than most people. Scanners like the CardScan ([\[www.cardscan.com\]\(http://www.cardscan.com\)\) can sync to Outlook, Act!, Goldmine, Palms, as well as popular Customer Relationship Management software such as Microsoft CRM, SalesLogix, and Salesforce.com.](http://</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Are You Plugged In?

Most of today's devices connect to your computer using a USB connection. It's not uncommon to see a desktop full of devices...on mine you'll find a wireless keyboard, an ergonomic mouse, a smartphone, a card scanner, a microphone, a flash drive for portable storage, an external hard drive for backups, an iPod, and a camera. My computer only has six plugs, and it's no fun to crawl under the desk to plug and unplug all these gadgets. Instead, get a USB hub for your desktop. It works like an extension cord, providing you with four to eight extra USB ports, and it can be conveniently located wherever you like. Look for a powered hub with its own power supply, to keep all those gadgets running smoothly. And check to make sure it's the fast USB 2.0, not the old, slower USB 1.1 or 1.0.

Shortcuts And Hotkeys

The fewer clicks, the faster you get your work done. Consider upgrading to a multimedia keyboard like the ones from Logitech (<http://www.logitech.com>). These keyboards have loads of programmable buttons designed to save you clicks. Maybe you already have one but never learned how to use it...try out all those buttons and see what it can do. With a single tap, you can access email, the web, your documents, and more. Program a few of the keys to do exactly what you need. Don't forget to install the drivers on the installation CD—if you plug in directly, your keyboard may type just fine, but the special features won't work. While you're at it, try out the scroll button

on your mouse, or upgrade to a mouse that has one. This simple wheel, usually found between the left and right mouse buttons, allows you to page up and down more easily, and it makes a world of difference when you're reading documents or web pages.

A Home Of Your Own

Tired of sorting through bookmarks and typing in website addresses? Let Yahoo! or Google bring information to you with a custom home page (<http://my.yahoo.com> and <http://www.google.com/ig>). You can select news and add links to your favorite sites or pull in information directly with RSS (really simple syndication). There's plenty more—get the TV schedule, monitor stocks, check the weather, just to name a few. You can even set alerts to notify you when specific news stories are added. Be sure to set this as your Internet browser's home page to save yet another click.

An added bonus? You can get to your personal home page from any computer with an Internet connection, so even if you're on the road, you'll have the information you need at your fingertips.

Two Monitors Are Better Than One

You may have thought the biggest advantage of switching to an LCD, flatscreen monitor was the space it saves on your desktop. Now studies are showing that one of the simplest, most profound ways to increase productivity is to get two! You can keep email open in one screen while managing your work on the other. If you have a large spreadsheet, you can see it all at once. You can compare two documents—or two website pages—side by side. The mouse works as usual, moving from one monitor to the other. The possibilities are endless, and as simple as it sounds, the change is dramatic. You'll need a video card that has

two video outputs, as well as the second monitor, but the rest is already built into Windows XP.

What's Your Favorite?

Each of us works differently; what's right for one person may not work for another. Try one thing at a time, and see what works best for you. Keep an eye out for the gadgets your friends and col-

leagues use, and get their opinions. It may take a little time to adjust to new tools, but whatever you do, don't miss out on these great opportunities to streamline your desktop and your work.

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