

May 1, 2009 Newsletter

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1. To keep it on, or not to keep it on

In honor of Earth Day, and in the spirit of the continuous mindfulness each citizen of Earth should have regarding energy conservation, I thought we'd discuss a very common question. One of the most common questions asked of IT technicians is, "Should I leave my computer on all the time?" There is no single answer that is most appropriate for everyone, and the answer that may be best for you today, might not be true in the future.

Generally, computers can be classified in to two categories, business and personal, and likewise their users. Business computers are those in a common office, and managed by a professional IT staff; and personal computers are those used in a home, or those used in a small business and not managed by a professional staff. Here's where the divide is for the answer to our question.

In a business environment, the IT staff will often have their equipment configured to update security, operating system and application software overnight, as to not interrupt workflow during the day. Productivity interruptions can cost a business a lot of money. But the IT staff should also have the power management features of the machines set properly to minimize wasted electricity during non-business hours. If this sounds more like your scenario, check with your IT people, but my guess is that they'll tell you to leave it on, but log out, every night.

For home computers, the situation is often different. Many people are only home and awake a handful of hours during the work week. It's not as critical if the computer is slower while doing updates or scans. So it doesn't make sense to me to leave an idle computer on while the user is not home. What I usually recommend is this, turn it on the first time you need it in the day; turn it off when you go to bed. If you know no one will be using the machine for more than an hour or two, turn it off.

However, in all cases, it is important to check the power management settings of the computer to make sure they are set at reasonable levels. Here are the ones I usually use: 10 minutes for the screen-saver to activate, 20 minutes for the screen to turn off, 20 minutes for the hard drive to power down.

In years past, people were concerned about causing wear and tear on the electrical components by turning them on and off frequently throughout the day. There never seemed to be any conclusive proof on either side of this argument, but whatever portion was true years ago has been significantly reduced by advances in technology.

Related reading:
<http://www.pccomputernotes.com/newsletter/jan01/013101b.htm>
<http://computer.howstuffworks.com/question328.htm>

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2. Help cure disease with your PC

So let's say you've decided that you do want to leave your computer on during extended times of inactivity. Might as well put it good use by helping cure diseases, right? Check out Stanford University's Folding@home project. The goal of the project is to understand how proteins in our bodies assemble themselves, or 'fold', to become ready to do their jobs. But sometimes they 'misfold', which can sometimes lead to serious diseases like Alzheimer's, ALS, Huntington's and Parkinson's disease, and many cancers.

Folding@home is distributed computing project, which means that all the computational tasks are divided up among multiple computers to solve the calculations faster. It's almost like enlisting your buddies to help you shovel the driveway - three get it done faster than one could. But imagine that every resident of Philadelphia is at your house helping you shovel. And your driveway is longer than I can imagine. That's closer to the scale that we're talking about.

Related reading:
<http://folding.stanford.edu/>

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3. Phantom power

Thirty years ago, I doubt anyone could have imagined the degree to which electronics have become commonplace today. We all love the entertainment, convenience, security and communication value these things provide. But one thing many people don't realize, is that many electronic devices still use electricity even when they are not on. It's a concept called phantom power, among many other names, and it means that power is being wasted by devices that are not doing anything. TVs, DVD players, computers, cell phone chargers and many others are reaching in to your pocket and taking your money.

Fortunately, there's an easy way to curb this wastefulness. As most people already know, you should have your electronics plugged in to surge protectors to protect them from power spikes. Most surge protectors have an on/off switch on them, so just switch it off when you're not using anything! It may seem like a hassle to cluster electronics in a way that lends itself to this, but it really isn't.

Let me offer an example, which is how I have some equipment in my office set up. In one surge protector, I have a TV, VCR, DVD player and radio that all are rarely used. In another surge protector in the same area, I have a computer and monitor that I use frequently. The switches on both surge protectors stay off unless I need to use the equipment connected to them. When I'm done, I turn it right back off.

Related reading:

<http://planetgreen.discovery.com/tech-transport/penny-pinching-save-energy-by.html>

4. About me and this newsletter

Lee Abrams is an IT professional in the Philadelphia area, and has over 8 years experience helping computer users and bringing valuable services to small businesses. People have come to rely on his experience, integrity and speedy service in a variety of situations, including computer, network and server installation and repairs (Windows and Apple OS X computers), website design and maintenance, consulting and coaching, PC disinfection and clean-up, and general technology services.

I write this newsletter as a value-added service to my clients as a way to help keep computer users abreast of the rapidly changing landscape. Please feel free to pass this on to anyone who you may feel this will be useful, but unaltered.

I would never lead you astray, so every website link in this newsletter has been visited by me and has been verified to be non-malicious at the time of writing.

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