

HOME OFFICE

Computer Checkups Prevent Bugs That Can Stop Work Cold

By BOB DUKE
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Computers, as do cars, need occasional tuneups to perform well and prevent breakdowns.

While a stalled car may leave you stuck in the middle of the El Toro "Y" at rush hour, a stalled computer may put you temporarily out of business, wreck the job you are working on, mislead you into buying a new computer or slowly drive you mad.

An out-of-tune computer runs out of hard disk storage space prematurely, processes data at decreasing speed, displays obscure error messages frequently, garbles data and changes its normal mode of operation.

As with a car, it may continue to run for a while, but without a tuneup, performance and reliability will continue to deteriorate until it refuses to run. Tuneups normally cover hardware preventive maintenance, optimizing software functions and adjusting operating parameters such as default settings, time-out intervals, set up option and menu construction.

Hardware problems are rare, mainly hard and floppy disk drive malfunctions and printer jams, according to Luis Tapia, vice president of Uptime Service Associates Inc. in Anaheim.

Software and operator errors account for most tuneup problems.

"Software has outpaced people's ability to use it," said Ray Hendon, assistant manager at Egghead Discount Software Inc. in Irvine.

Learning to use a computer requires a lot of time, study and information. "If I were to toss you the keys to a Boeing 747, you wouldn't expect to go home and fly it tonight," Hendon said.

Kazem Alinaghian, owner of

Computer Research Center Inc. in Irvine said, "The problems we see are the result of people not knowing how to manage their computer. They copy everything into their root directory and screw up the whole computer."

Alinaghian recommends that you have your computer tuned up every six months. "We test the system for viruses, align the files on the hard drive, check the hard drive for optimum speed, check out the ports and vacuum the inside of the machine," he said.

CRC charges \$55 to \$75 for a tuneup.

Excel Computer in Irvine recommends a yearly computer tune-up that consists of vacuuming the hardware interior, cleaning the heads of the floppy disk drives, optimizing the hard drive and checking the organization of the start up files and menu system.

"We charge \$65 per hour with a one hour minimum," said Excell partner Anton Fixt. Fixt suggested that home office computer users consider an annual maintenance contract which, for \$200 to \$350, will cover support, parts and labor for one computer and its peripheral equipment such as a monitor and printer.

If you wait too long for a tuneup and get stranded, there is emergency help available.

For problems with a particular piece of software, you can call the manufacturer's customer support service (free or for the price of the phone call) or the retailer where you purchased it. Hendon, at Egghead, said store personnel would try to help you with a problem whether you bought the software there. "We've all been there and, besides, it's good for business," he said.

Steve Hamori, with CompUSA, a

hardware/software mass merchandiser in Fountain Valley, said sales and service representatives could help out with installation problems and basic packages such as Microsoft's Windows.

Both Egghead and CompUSA said that with 2,000 to 3,000 software titles in stock, it is impossible to give trouble-shooting advice on many packages. Pacific Bell's Orange County Yellow Pages has seven pages of Computer-Service and Repair listings, such as Excel and Uptime.

Many, such as Excel, provide telephone support if you cannot bring in the machine. Tapia of Uptime suggests that you establish a relationship with a service provider so there will be someone to take your calls.

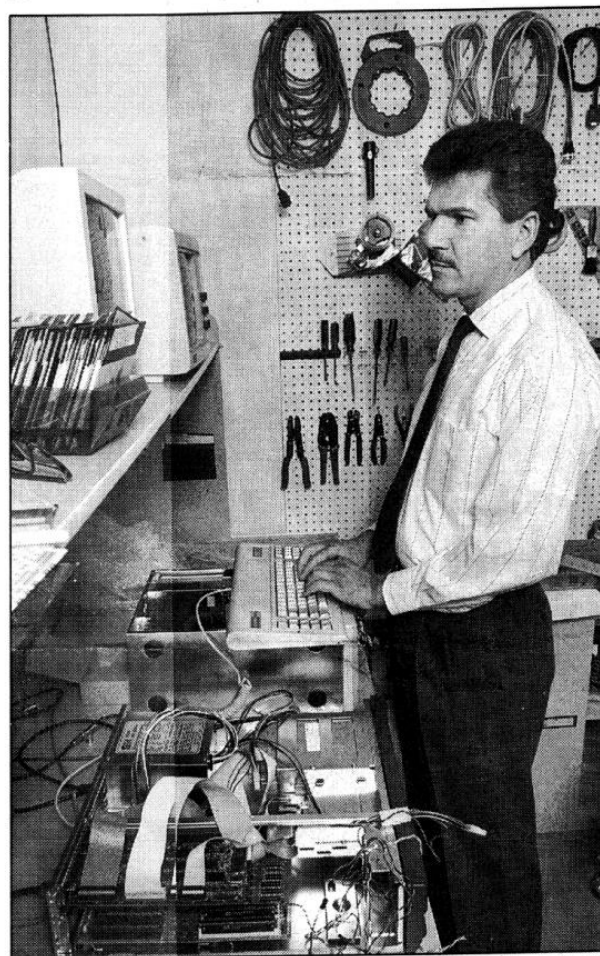
Another alternative is to establish a relationship with an individual consultant, such as E.D. Buck of Data Dynamics in Capistrano Beach, who can provide training and technical support in your home and offers expertise on a several software packages.

Consultants such as Buck, whose fee is \$80 per hour, can function as your mentor and can work with you to reconfigure your computer system to optimize operation and accommodate your unique needs.

To solve simple problems yourself, prevent major problems and get the most from professional help, the experts offer the following tips:

- Hamori: "Keep reading your manuals to gain a general familiarity with how your computer operates and to learn how your software is supposed to work."

- Alinaghian: "Learn how to organize your directories and files to keep everything segmented and orderly. Also, learn DOS [the IBM PC disk operating system]; it is still the foundation for everything and



GARY AMBROSE / Los Angeles Times

Yousef Alinaghian of Computer Research Center Inc. in Irvine runs a software test on PCC clone computer, foreground, after assembling it.

a great tool."

- Tapia: "The No. 1 thing people [with computer problems] don't do is write down the exact error message."

- Fixt adds: "If you have a problem or a fault, leave the computer running while you call for help or await service. If the fault is intermittent, keep a careful log of system status and conditions."

- Hendon: "Don't assume that because a function appears simple to you it will be simple for the computer. Simple functions may have a lot of complexity, so you have to read your documentation before attempting something new."

- Buck: "Before buying a new software package, first have it thoroughly demonstrated by the salesperson [about an hour] and then have the person who demonstrated it install it. This should bypass about 90% of problems."

Working alone as they most often do, without the support available to conventional office workers, home office computer users are particularly vulnerable to computer breakdowns and are often unprepared for them.

Because of long neglect, home office computer failures tend to be complicated, and the user is seldom well equipped to take advantage of assistance.

Before you are stranded by a computer failure, consider what you want your plan of action will be if you encounter an unrecoverable error or lose access to a critical file.

Readers are invited to send Home Office questions and ideas to Bob Duke, Home Office Feature, The Times Orange County, 1375 Sunflower Ave, Costa Mesa, CA 92626. Because of the volume of mail, it is impossible to answer letters individually.