Resolutions should include your computing life, too

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Changing computer habits rarely makes the list of top New Year's Resolutions, but there are three digital resolutions you should make to have a happier 2008, says Gerry McCartney, vice president for information technology and CIO of Purdue University.

"Changing habits doesn't get any easier when you are talking about how you use your computer," McCartney says. "But there are three things you can do to make for a great 2008 and not for a year of regrets."

1. Back up your computer.

Back it up, back it up, back it up. It sounds simple, but few of us do it. In the coming year there will be new technologies that might make this more convenient and less of a hassle.

"Computer hard drives are mechanical devices that spin at thousands of revolutions per minute that eventually, and often quite unexpectedly, become a worthless piece of e-garbage. It's a certainty that it's going to happen, but we don't know when," McCartney says.

When a hard drive fails, it will take not just old musty e-mails, but you could lose your family photos, any music you've purchased online, your address book and all of your work from the past few years.

"People are devastated when they lose all of their data, and in many

cases there's nothing that can be done to retrieve it," McCartney says.

The easiest way to back up a computer is with an external hard drive, and with prices now at less than $1 per gigabyte, it is quite affordable. If you use an Apple Macintosh, the new Time Machine feature makes this simple, and adds cool graphics as a sweetener.

There are online services that provide enough storage to back up computers, and these services offer the additional protection of being off site, in case your home or office is destroyed by fire or natural disaster. Two popular sites are Mozy (mozy.com) and Carbonite (www.carbonite.com). However, you are turning over your private information to strangers, and you should think about whether this puts you at risk before deciding to use such a service. Also, McCartney warns that these services should only be used to back up personal files and not for business data.

You can back up a few critical files on portable flash drives, but if you do, look for one that encrypts your files. "These get lost fairly often," McCartney says. "You may not want your files or photos appearing on the Internet."

2. Buy a shredder. A powerful one.

Because of concerns about identity theft, many people already shred credit card and bank statements, but there are a few other items that should be reduced to bits, as well.

"The newer cross-cut or micro-cut shredders also will cut credit cards and computer disks such as CDs or DVDs," McCartney says. "You'll be safer if these things aren't floating around in the world somewhere."

If you are cleaning out old files or boxes, you should also fire up the

shredder, McCartney says.

"Until just a few years ago, many formal documents contained our Social Security numbers and other information that we would now consider sensitive. Those boxes of 'treasures' in the attic could bring a family member a lot of grief if they fell into the wrong hands," McCartney says. "To be safe, a good rule of thumb is, if a paper has your name on it, shred it when you dispose of it."

3. Keep your protection up to date

By now everyone who has a PC connected to the Internet has learned — often the hard way — that installing anti-virus software is a must. But the bad guys find new ways to break into computers literally every day. The only defense is to be diligent about keeping the computer's own security systems up to date by installing patches and to make sure that the anti-virus software also is kept current.

"Everyone should already be using anti-virus software from a known source, such as from McAfee or Symantec," McCartney says. "But you have to still install system patches or system updates regularly. Having a corrupted machine can make your computing life miserable, but good defenses are available. We just have to use them."

Source: by Steve Tally, Purdue University

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