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America is awash with connected devices. A Pew Research Center study found that 84% of all American households have at least one smartphone. 80% have at least one desktop or laptop. Thirty-three percent of all Americans live in families with three or more smartphones, and 18% are hyper-connected, with 10 or more electronic devices at home. In real terms, desktops and laptops are actually cheaper to replace today than in 2010, but they're not exactly cheap. According to PC Magazine's analysis of the market for new PCs, you can expect to pay somewhere between \$410 and \$2,899 for a quality replacement machine. At full price, a top-line smartphone can easily cost \$700 out of the box. Updated electronics are not that expensive, but they lack a cache of really new products. The well-supported Live Longer Maintenance device offers the best of both worlds. This is much cheaper than replacing burnt devices with new or used replacements, and this postpones the devastating transition from one machine to another. The well-serviced devices of recent years last longer than mistreated equivalents, maintaining smooth personal and professional usage patterns and keeping more of your hard-earned money in your wallet along the way. These tips for maintaining electronic devices are all well within the capabilities of a typical non-expert computer user. Some of them are adapted to desktop computers and laptops. Others apply to a wider range of devices. Most are best done on a permanent basis. And no one demands excessive investment of time, effort or money. Computer Maintenance Tips - Physical and Environmental Tips These tips cover the physical accommodation and accessories of your devices, as well as the environment in which you store and manage them. 1. Keep the keyboard, mouse, and holes a clean start with lightweight material: keeping the device accessories and holes clean. The dirty keyboard will eventually stop working properly. Same for a dirty mouse. Replacing a keyboard costs about \$20 new, so replacing yours won't ruin you, but that money can absolutely be spent on the best stuff. Use a wet lint to clean the more accessible keyboard surfaces. Don't spray water directly on the keyboard or let the water pool anywhere on it - it will only make things worse. Use the same approach to clean the available mouse surfaces. To clean the most difficult to reach part of the keyboard and mouse, such as the optical hole of the mouse and the space under the keys, use a canister with compressed air. You can get one for \$5 or \$6 online or at your local hardware store. Don't neglect your laptop and desktop ports and crevices either. Dusty or particle-clogged ports reduce the flow of air into and out of the device, increasing the risk if you tend to forget small tasks like this, set repetitive calendar reminders every month. 2. Gently Clean Your Monitor Your monitor may seem sturdy enough, but it's as vulnerable to dust and debris as a keyboard and ports. Dust it periodically with microfiber fabric. Remove tougher stains with an LCD screen cleaner, which should cost you no more than \$6 - \$10 per can. 3. Keep food and drink away from desktops and laptops Repeat after me: Don't eat or drink on your desktop or laptop! Easier said than done when you work through lunch break or binge watching your favorite show with a fly of ice cream, of course. But think of the consequences: a single spill is enough to destroy the keyboard, and a large amount of landfill can penetrate the body of the device and wreak havoc on its internal components. After prematurely killing two keyboards in quick succession, I introduce a new rule in my family: nothing but water on the same surface as my laptop. It's not easy, but I've been able to hold fast so far. I highly recommend that you do the same. 4. Organize cords and other e-Debris If you have an active home office setup, it probably features a mess of strings, power strips, and occasional accessories on floors and work surfaces. This mess is unsightly and cumbersome, at least. If you have young children or pets, this may well pose a risk of electric shock. Depending on how busy your power strips and sockets are, you may have a fire hazard on your hands. And mixed cords are more vulnerable to damage, which means higher long-term ownership costs. It's easy to fix. First, buy an extra power bank or two - you can get a two-pack 6-out strip for less than \$12 on Amazon. Then, purchase some twist ties (low cost) or cable organizers (\$6 to \$14, depending on the type) to keep everything together in a deliberate manner. Turn off, untangle and reorient the cords in a convenient new organization system. Then plug it all back in. That's it. Pro Tip: Looking for more home office hacking? Check our post on the IRS Home Office tax deduction and then check with your tax advisor to determine if you are eligible. 5. Don't overpay batteries to resist the temptation to keep portable devices connected at all times. Not only is it unnecessary runoff on your local power grid, which means preventable bloat for your utility bills, but it's also actively bad for the batteries of your devices. Unnecessary charging actually slows down the regenerative capabilities of batteries. A year or so, or maybe earlier, you'll notice a drop-off in your device's ability to hold the charge. This will eventually get worse to the point that you need to have your cord charging at hand - meaning you won't be able to work or play online without an outlet nearby. Do not charge until the device is good and ready. I'm waiting until my laptop gets below 20%, for example. 6. Don't Block Vents Like People, Desktop and Portable must breathe. The operational rule here is not to block the air vents. Just like humans, machines have to breathe - although, in their case, it's to ensure their insides remain cool enough to function properly. This is especially important when you ask for a lot of high-performance games such as game games (Even if you're not a gamer, gaming laptops have significant advantages - this article from Walmart Canada explains why you can use one for cool jobs, for example.) If you have a desktop, keep the tower away from any obstacles like cabinets or walls. If possible to do it safely, lift it up to ensure a good flow of air on both sides. For laptops, maintain a clear workspace free from clutter that can interfere with the flow of air - such as documents or books. Check periodically if the fans are working. No matter what device you have, maintain adequate ventilation and reasonable climate control. You don't have to blow up the air conditioning or leave the windows open in winter, but installing a thermostat to 80 probably isn't a great idea either. 7. Have a Desiccant on your hand You dropped your phone in the toilet. Oh! What is your next step? Without hesitation, most people confidently reply: Put it in a jar of rice! It's not the worst thing you could do for your waterlogged phone, but it's not the perfect solution either. Rice is simply the best desiccant, or drying agent that most people lie around the house. It's not done to purify water from sensitive devices - it's made for food. As it turned out, there are products made specifically for the wash of moisture from electronics. They're commonly known as desiccant bags, and they're cheap - \$7 for four 10.5 ounce bags on Amazon, each more than enough to dry a waterlogged phone. An even cheaper alternative: small bags of silica gel that come in many delivery boxes. Instead of throwing them away, collect them as they come, taking care to store them somewhere baby and pet proof. You will need a few to dry the dripping phone. 8. Keep magnets away Keep your home office - and your appliances yourself - away from magnets, even weak refrigerator views. Your hard drive is incredibly sensitive to the magnetic fields of any force. If you need to remember websites or phone numbers, instead use post-it notes or digital files. Store the magnets where they belong in the kitchen. 9. Be careful with unfamiliar WiFi networks Be careful with unprotected WiFi networks in cafes, airports, hotel lobbies and other public places. Without basic network security, your computer sits duck - there's an open to any hacker or cyber criminal who feels like sending a malicious package your way. If in doubt, use a virtual private network (VPN) to encrypt your connection and repel attacks. Pro Tip: If you're not sure you're doing enough to protect your computer - or the personal information stored in - check out our review of tips to protect your online privacy. 10. Get a phone case and screen protector I have a confession to do: I never crack Phone. Whether it's up to luck, exceptional care, or a mixture of the two, I'm not sure. I'm probably in the minority on this. My wife cracked her last three screens, all under the relatively mundane mundane phones are resistant but not indestructible. Throw them the wrong way and you will live with the consequences. The choice between buying a new phone or buying a protective case to reflect kinetic energy is not a choice at all. The quality cases cost as little as \$30 new on Amazon, and are cheaper still on discount sites and on the secondary market. The same goes for screen protectors. They are even cheaper - for as little as \$5 to \$6 apiece, depending on the size of the screen and width. While they will not protect against violent consequences, they will resist scratching indefinitely under normal circumstances. Software maintenance tips and systems These tips cover device hardware components, operating systems, memory, software, and vulnerability to external threats. 11. Turn it off properly every night to bake it in your night routine. It only takes a minute each day and it can extend the life of your devices for months or years. This is especially important for Windows computers, since Microsoft patches systems are only on shut down. Also, how you closed the questions. Avoid cold loading of your machine: holding the power button until the system shuts down. It's only for emergencies - otherwise, it just highlights your hardware and software. Take an extra minute or two to turn off the machine properly using the operating system shutdown button. This is your call, do you want to apply this advice to your mobile devices. Personally, I only turn off my smartphone for updates, since I would like to be available for emergency calls and alerts during the night. 12. Always Have a Firewall Running Your Operating System Is the first line of protection for your device from malware. With few exceptions, it should always be up and running. This is especially important when installing new programs, and doubly when you download program files from a source other than the developer or manufacturer. (As a general rule, you should avoid downloading any files from unverified sources.) Turning on the firewall is easy. If you have a desktop or laptop for your PC, read Microsoft's primer here. Mac OS X v10.5.1 and later have application firewalls that provide protection for specific applications; you can read more about those here. In some circumstances, your operating system's firewall may interfere with certain programs. This is a problem with some multiplayer games and older versions of Apple iTunes, for example. If you suspect that the firewall is disrupting your computing experience, please contact the developer of the relevant program for troubleshooting tips. 13. Regularly remove unwanted programs from periodically agitating your system for unwanted programs that are not too malicious. Experts say these programs are bloated, and they can negatively affect the performance of your device when allowed to accumulate over time. To detect viruses, close as many open apps as possible and then open your operating system task manager and see how many apps they actually have. You'll be shocked at how many programs are still running in the background, eating up system resources. While some such programs are important system processes, many are trivial and can be safely removed. You can solve some of the problems associated with viruses by running a free cleaner system like CCleaner. (Don't bother paying for the system cleaner - the quality varies widely, and some sketchy cleaners are actually vehicles for advertising and spyware.) For best results, you need to manually remove the viruses - and you have to do it right. 14. Removing Program Icon Removal Completely is not the right way to remove unnecessary programs from your computer. You need to complete a formal deletion process for every application you want to get rid of. Sucking things into a basket or recycling bin doesn't cut it. Use your own removal app if it exists. Generally speaking, installing Windows software is more complex than non-installation equivalents of a Mac, but you should still check with the experts in your system to make sure you're doing it right. The Cult Mac has a good review of harder Mac removal, for example. 15. Use an external hard drive to back up and additionally store files Your job or hobby may require you to download or build and store large multimedia files. Of course, as the day follows at night, these files will affect the speed of your system and overall performance. But you can't just delete them, can you? Yes and no. You can remove them from your computer hard drive - as long as you have another home for them. The external hard drive is your best, and cheapest, bet. Moore's Law was good for the external hard drive market. The cost of the drive has moved in almost the opposite proportion to the capacity of the drive. These days, you can find a 2-terabyte model for \$60 to \$70 at major retailers. If that means keeping your \$800 PC running strong for another two years, this is a decent investment for sure. 16. Running a full scan of malware/malware (see below) is not reliable. Malware developers and their white hat nemeses are constantly locked in a deadly, globe-embracing battle for advantage. New malware crops up as fast as white hats to neutralize it. Enter system scanning of malware. You should periodically start scanning malware, ideally with a greater frequency than checking viruses. I won't go through all the steps here - check out PC World's comprehensive guide to finding and removing malware from Windows computers here. (PC World recommends using Malwarebytes to scan your system, but there are other options.) 17. Get anti-malware software (But choose carefully) The best way to protect your computer from malware, primarily is to use a high-quality anti-malware program. This is especially important for PCs that are more vulnerable to viruses, worms and other malware. New laptops and PCs usually come with anti-malicious software preinstalled or at least included in the package, but be careful with taking it for a price. Some antivirus programs cause more problems than they solve. In 2017, for example, Best Buy stopped selling antivirus products to Moscow's Kaspersky Lab under intense public pressure, amid concerns that the company's software could function as a backdoor for covert monitoring and data retrieval by the FSB and other Russian intelligence agencies. There is no substitute for due diligence. Contact a reputable source for recommendations on the ideal malware program for your particular system and needs: PC Magazine has a good overview here, for example. And Malwarebytes, recommended by PC World above, is not a bad choice for humble users. 18. Always be on the hunt for program updates and patches don't turn off your system upgrades and fixes. This routine exercise requires minimal buy-in at your end - patches and updates usually set themselves up when your computer is off or asleep. One way to make sure you stay on schedule is to turn off your computer regularly. And when your operating system warns you about the necessary update, don't keep snoozing it - just bite the bullet and do it even if it interrupts your workflow. 19. Reinstalling the operating system periodically updates only go so far and too many layered updates can actually be counterproductive. The most thorough way to clean unwanted files and reset the bones of your machine is to reinstall the operating system every so often. Reinstalling the operating system requires a lot of time, but it doesn't require any advanced technical skills. Microsoft has more on its Windows reinstall tool here. Just make sure you reinstall any necessary apps too. Always keep the original installation tools handy, or at least know where to find them. 20. Free up space with cloud storage solutions External hard drives are not the last word to back up. They have flaws. They are easily inappropriate. They can fall into the wrong hands. They have the ultimate ability. They need to be present to be a useful list as far as possible. If you're looking for an over-storage solution, consider a secure cloud storage service such as Dropbox or Box. Prices are usually year-on-year, and your net cost is likely to be higher than the external hard drive - for example, a Dropbox 1-terabyte Plus plan costs \$99 a year when paid annually. Additional convenience can be costly. Just know that cloud storage isn't ideal for extremely sensitive data, as evidenced by periodic breaches. The last word. When finally comes the time to get rid of the old electronic device, please do it responsibly. If you live in a city of any significant size, you are almost serviced by a government or non-profit e-waste recycling service licensed to recycle old desktop computers, laptops, tablets, electronic readers, smartphones and such devices. In my hometown of Minneapolis, a fantastic organization called Tech Dump has rescued thousands of old devices from landfills since its founding - including about a dozen from my family alone. Donation donations of the old device is not a purely selfless act. For those eligible to detail deductions from their state and federal tax returns, this is a budget-friendly move. My e-waste donations have reduced my tax burden by \$300 to \$400, with more to come this year. Consult your tax advisor to determine if it makes sense for you to detail. Do you use any of these tips to extend the life of your computer? 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