

Technology Corner

By Joseph G. Hodges, Jr.

Privacy Software—How Clean Is Your Hard Drive?

One of the biggest concerns we as professionals have is protecting the privacy and confidentiality interests of our clients, particularly when we upgrade our computer equipment and are left with legacy PCs sitting around that may have all sorts of confidential and even client privileged information stored on them.

In the past, we typically donated this equipment to nonprofits or even land fills without much regard for the security of the data that might still be stored on them. A few of us were diligent enough to think of erasing or even reformatting the hard drive before we disposed of the machine. However, the progress of technology over the last few years has taught us that, short of actual and total physical destruction, there are ways of recovering much if not all of the data that is left on a hard drive even after these well meaning attempts are made to clean them off.

Now that we can no longer toss our used PCs into land fills and often must even pay to have them and the data that is stored on them properly disposed of, we are much more conscious of the security of that data and how to protect and enhance it. One of the best techniques, once the required or essential data had been properly backed up on some sort of a secondary media, such as the hard drive of the newer PC or a ZIP drive or even a CD-ROM, is to use disk cleaning software to completely and securely remove all the data that may be stored there. In doing so, it is important to select a software program that is specifically designed to perform this task and in a way that meets or exceeds the government's own standards for this sort of thing. It is also important to avoid programs that merely erase traces of browser sessions or attempt to maintain the privacy of the data that is already stored on your PC or that performs functions that are not directly related to the task at hand.

If you look around for programs that fit the indicated requirements, you will find that there are several of



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them, so many so that it would be impossible to review and report on all of them in a column such as this. Instead, I have chosen to cover a few of them that seem to be both popular and representative in the hope that this will be enough to peak your interest in this subject and encourage you to explore the available options further.

As a preliminary matter, some of the things to look for in such software include ease of use, ease of installation and setup, the effectiveness of the privacy that is offered, the feature set it comes with (such as browser cleaning, windows cleaning, deleting unwanted cookies, deletion overwrite and deleting Web site browser history). With those overall objectives in mind, let's now take a closer look at some of the programs.

One of the newer and more popular programs in this regard is Zero Trace by Champion Software (www.championsoft.com). Zero Trace, which is now in Version 1.6, can be purchased for only \$19.95 after a 20-day free trial, a price which is one-quarter the price of other similar programs—and yet this program does more than most of those programs can or ever will do. Its features include cleaning index.data files without the need to reboot, support for over 100 plug-ins, erasing files beyond recovery, a cookie wizard that saves desired cookies, free updates for life, a shredder that will erase certain files for good, a Plug-in Creator that allows you to upload plug-ins to share with other users, an update feature that can automatically download new plug-ins, an online help file, shrinkable multiple interfaces, an ability to hide in the system tray while cleaning and the ability to destroy previously deleted files. Zero Trace was developed by 18-year-old Jack Freeman, who is a senior at Colorado Academy in Englewood, Colorado. Zero Trace's job is to erase all activity from your computer, including deleted e-mails sitting in a trash folder, temporary Web files from sites you have viewed or downloaded, and any records showing the sites you have visited. The "shredder" tool, which is the key component we are interested in, will permanently erase files, including word processing documents and pictures. CNET.com has given Zero Trace a five-star rating.

Another popular program is WipeDrive by White Canyon Software based in Cedar City, Utah. This product, which is U.S. Department of Defense approved, costs \$39.95. It completely wipes both the operating system and all programs, permanently wipes all data off the hard drive, gives a computer a clean slate and a fresh start, then reloads the operating system and programs if desired, leaving your computer virtually like

new. WipeDrive was featured in a November 3, 2005, article in the *NEW YORK TIMES* by Thomas J. Fitzgerald entitled, *Deleted But Not Gone*, in which he said, "It offers 12 overwriting methods, including the Defense Department standard with three overwrites." A single pass takes three to five minutes for each gigabyte of disk space, depending on factors such as a disk's speed. The program can examine all sectors of a disk to verify whether overwriting was successful. WipeDrive maintains an impressive list of clients who use their software on their Web site at www.whitecanyon.com. For those who want or need a heavy duty version of this program, there is WipeDrive Pro, which sells for \$99.95. WipeDrive is even listed as an approved sanitizing solution by the Department of Defense on the GSA Web site, where it has been in use for more than six years. It also provides support for all kinds of drives, including external hard drives, USB thumb drives, memory sticks and cards, diskettes and hard drive partitions.

Still another popular program is CyberScrub Privacy Suite by CyberScrub LLC (www.cyberscrub.com) based in Atlanta, Georgia. This program, which costs \$49.95, claims it deletes all evidence of online activity, secures data with powerful encryption, erases previously deleted files, destroys e-mail and ensures corporate compliance. It erases and wipes free space, Internet history, specific files, e-mails, instant messenger, formerly deleted data, traces from P2P files, newsgroups and picture. Its encryption feature is new, and multi-language versions are available. There are side-by-side comparisons of CyberSuite and McAfee Quick Clean, Allume Internet Cleanup, Norton Clean Sweep, BC Wipe, Erase, Internet Erase and Evidence Eliminator on the CyperScrub Web site. This product allows you to erase and destroy data with methods that exceed the U.S. Department of Defense standards for file secure erasure. The current Version 4 comes with a completely new interface and many new features, including a full scheduler, the ability to run any feature either at a system event, such as start up, or a scheduled event, including when idle, full support for Mozilla and Firefox, encryption features, auto removal of Thumbs.db files, the ability to retain Restore Points, the addition of popular P2P applications, and news reader support.

Still another popular program is Window Washer from Webroot Software, Inc. (www.webroot.com) based in Boulder, Colorado. Window Washer is currently in Version 6.0 and costs \$29.95. New in Version 6 is deeper cleaning power to cover even more areas of your PC, a free space cleaner to free up more of your PC's resources and protection for more brows-

ers, including Mozilla and Firefox. This product was an Editor's Choice of PC Magazine in May of 2005. In addition to scrubbing your PC to remove unnecessary files, including those from browser activities, it has a "bleach" encryption feature which completely overwrites files with random characters to make them unrecoverable with features that are so powerful that they exceed the tough standards of the U.S. Department of Defense and the National Security Agency. It also cleans free space and has a one-click shredder that lets you simply and conveniently shred a folder and all of its contents, or just a single file, in one step. It also has a safety feature that helps prevent you from accidentally removing important files. Its smart cookie saver deletes the cookies you don't want and saves the ones you need. It can also be set to do a total system erase if you need to reformat or are donating or selling your PC, which is the feature that is of most interest to us for purposes of this column.

A few other products we are aware of that are designed to perform the sort of data destruction we have

been talking about here follow: Evidence Eliminator, Windows Int. Cleaner, Privacy Eraser, Privacy Protector, Tracks Eraser Pro, Web Eraser Pro, Internet Washer, sCleaner, Windows Trace Remover, HistoryKill, Evidence Blaster, Shred XP, Internet Eraser, Ghost Surf, No Evidence, xCleaner, Smart Protector, Cover My Tracks, Quick Wiper and Wintracks. If you put any one of those names into a Google or Yahoo search, you will be able to easily find more information about the product.

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