

Tips, Tricks and Advice from your local “IT Guru”

This month I want to talk to you about saving you money. I've been fixing computers for over 30 years and going to people's homes for the last 10, so I thought I would share the most frequent and easiest to fix problems I've come across.

The first is a bit of a cliché, but really works: Switch it off and back on again! I'm thinking here specifically of Internet connection problems. If you find that suddenly you can't get on the Internet or your wireless connection disappears, the first thing to try is switching the router off at the mains, leaving it a few seconds and switching it back on again. It does no harm to unplug the lead to the phone socket as well. It sounds crazy, but I've lost count of the number of times a simple power cycle has solved this sort of problem. There's nothing worse as a user than having someone turn up, flick a switch, and have everything burst back into life.

Another common problem is the PC giving an error on startup saying something like, “Boot disk not found.” Many things can cause this and lots of them can be serious, but one of the first things to check is that there is not a CD or, on older systems a floppy disk, in the drive. Also, on newer PCs make sure there are no USB sticks plugged in. Embarrassingly, I fell foul of this recently when a USB stick was plugged into an extension lead hidden under the desk.

USB can cause many problems with computer systems, especially on some Dell computers, causing either the system to not start or it to get stuck just showing a logo on the screen. If this happens try unplugging all the USB devices, including mice and keyboards (you can plug them back in once the thing starts). Sometimes trying to power all those devices at startup is just too much, and the PC gives up.

The proliferation of Wireless networks has caused more and more problems, and now that nearly every household has a wireless router interference is becoming a bigger issue. Routers only have a few channels to work with, and finding an empty one can be hard. Coupled with the fact that most are shipped with the same preset channel, it's no wonder people experience problems with slow connections and bad range. A quick fix for this is to get into the router settings and change the channel. There should be instructions on how to do this in the manual that came with the router, but if not a call to the help desk of your Internet provider should do the trick.

Another common cause of problems is printer software. Every time you buy a new printer, and most people seem to go through two or three in the life of one computer, you have to install all of the software that comes with the new device. Sometime this can conflict with the older printer software, so it's always worth having a bit of a clear out before installing the new one.

One of my pet peeves is being called out to fix a problem, only to find someone else has had a go at fixing it previously and only made things worse. I'm not saying you shouldn't have a go yourself, after all that's what this article is all about. What I do think is crazy, is getting the kid next door, a friend's child, or the receptionist's son to have a look. Just because someone did ICT at school and plays games all day on an Xbox, doesn't make them qualified to diagnose and repair your computer. You wouldn't let the local “yoof” who has put a spoiler and noisy exhaust on his Corsa repair your car, so why let them loose with all your precious data? For home users this is almost forgivable, but for businesses? It's like letting someone from the shop floor do your year-end accounts because they can use a calculator!

Finally, don't expect miracles. Computers are complicated things and do go wrong. Unlike most other devices we expect them to do, and be, many things and getting all the software and hardware to work together is not easy. Sometimes the best way to fix things really is to wipe it clean and start again, surely the ultimate switch it off and on again!

If you have any questions or anything you would like me to cover in this column, email me at look@4-11consultants.co.uk

David runs 4-11 Consultants, a local company specialising in home and small business computer problems and can be contacted on 01206736161