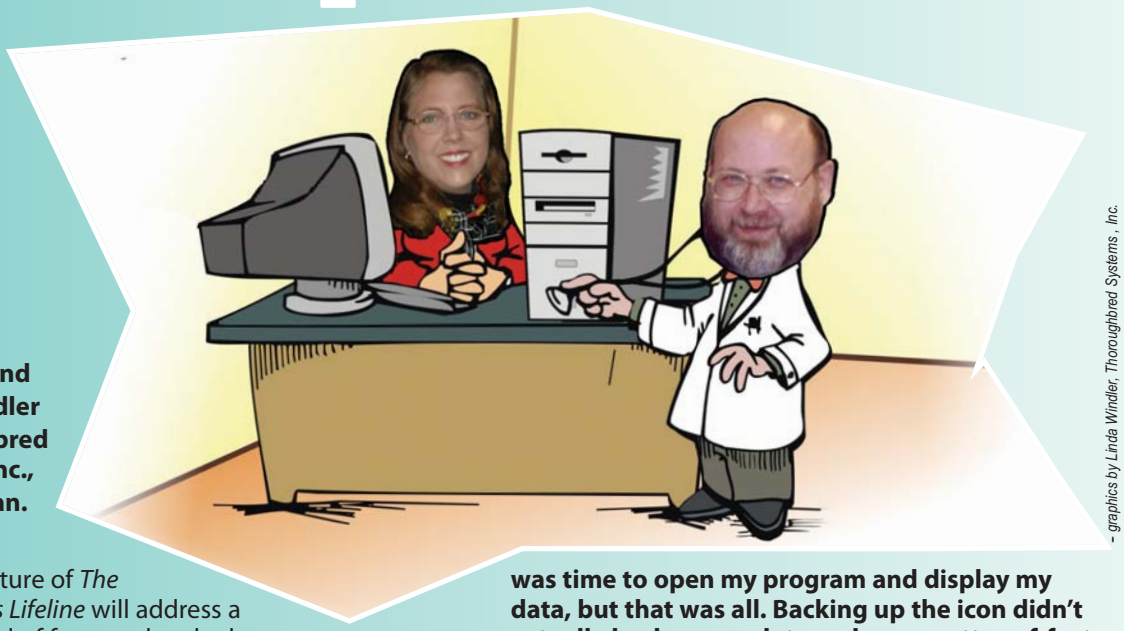
Computer Corner



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This feature of *The Kansas Lifeline* will address a handful of frequently asked computer questions in each edition. Readers are invited to e-mail questions to krwa@krwa.net to be answered in future articles.

Q. I already have the answer to my problem but I am writing to save some other poor soul the pain I went through. I recently needed to restore data from a backup I had made on a flash drive. I considered myself to be well backed up since I not only took the time to write to a flash drive but I also made a monthly CD. I wasn't concerned at all, but when I tried to restore what I believed to be my backed up data, I found I had nothing. It turns out I had not been making the right choices in burning my CDs or writing to my flash drive. I should have been backing up either the folder that contained my information or opening the folder and selecting all it's contents. Instead I was spotting the familiar little picture, the icon, I used to open the program from my computer desktop and choosing it to be backed up. I now know that this icon was just that, an icon, merely a little picture known as a shortcut. Double clicking it on my desktop would signal the computer that it was time to open my program and display my data, but that was all. Backing up the icon didn't actually backup any data and, as a matter-of-fact, when I took a look at the size of my backup it was only 1K, while my actual data would have been more than 500MB. So, like I say, no question, but I thought my experience might help the next guy.

A. Unfortunately this experience is not that unusual. It is very important that computer users understand that a yellow folder is a vessel, i.e. a container, a holder of data. Anything else is a single file of one type or another. If one wants to backup their 'files' they need to know what folder or folders contain them and backup all important files by choosing each file or by choosing the folder or folders that contain them.

A shortcut icon is a teeny tiny file that contains nothing but the instructions to the computer as to where something may be found and the directions for the computer to find and open the file represented by the shortcut icon. 1K is the same as saying one thousand bytes. Data files may be many thousands of bytes, referred to as Kilobytes or even many millions of bytes known as Megabytes. One billion bytes are termed one Gigabyte. Hard drive storage devices these days are typically hundreds of

Gigabytes in size to be able to hold all these many thousand or million byte files. Some individual files, like video clips, can even be multiple Gigabytes in size. The newest hard drive arrivals on the market are the Terabyte drives (a trillion or thousand billion bytes of data).

When backing up it is essential that one pay attention to what selections are made, the file size, type and name. Insurance companies may insure hardware and provide the cost of replacement but they can't replace data. Only a good backup can do that. It is up to the person at the helm to verify that the appropriate data is selected.

Q. What is CASS mail certification?

A. CASS stands for 'Coding Accuracy Support System'. CASS is a postal program providing a financial discount for mass mailings certified to contain an accurate eleven-digit zip code in barcode form. The first five numbers are the traditional part of the zip code that has been used for years. The next four are the extended zip numbers, which can be looked up on the Internet at http://zip4.usps.com/zip4/. The final two digits are known as the delivery point. While the extended four characters identify the side of the street on each block, the last two signify the specific delivery point, i.e. house, apartment or office.

While complete zip codes may be obtained from the Internet, for a water system to take advantage of the federal government's CASS Mail postage discount there are a number of elements that must come together.

To begin with the software used for utility billing must have CASS mail abilities built in. CASS capable software will, for one, have fields that handle the complete zip, including the delivery point. Secondly the software will print the proper address in barcode form in the appropriate place on the bill. Included in software that is CASS capable will be the ability to export the address data onto a disk to be mailed or as data to be e-mailed to a company that will complete the zip codes and send the altered addresses back. These companies provide the certification that makes the postal discount possible.

So the service is two-fold. First, it keeps the computer operator from needing to go onto the Internet to look up and type in the extended zip information for each and every customer and second it provides the proof that the information meets the standard. The cost of this service is minimal, normally less than $50, but the certification must be renewed every six months.

Even though the certification and the fee must be repeated every six months, any water system of more than five hundred customers will save money on postage. And, though smaller systems can't take advantage of postal savings, a one time CASS fee can get their zip codes brought up to date with virtually no effort and little expense. This will cause their barcodes to be complete. Once all addresses are brought up to date, any new addresses can be added by looking up the information on the Internet. Even systems that do renew every six months usually update from the Internet in between certified updates.

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Depending on the size of the system, CASS mailing discounts can amount to hundreds or even thousands of dollars per year in postal savings.

Q. We are looking at purchasing a new computer for the district. People keep telling us not to get one with the newer Vista Operating System but to instead 'stick with' XP. What kind of problems might we have if we get Vista and is there any advantage to the newer software we would miss out on if we opted for XP?

A. We tackled some of the problems with Vista versus XP in an earlier issue however the part of the question concerning what advantages could Vista provide have not really been addressed. Problems are usually at the top of the list because left unresolved or ignored they can make for some extreme difficulties and dilemmas. The most important question to ask is "Will a change of operating system still allow essential software to function?" and if not "Is there an upgrade available yet that will?"

Some telemetry systems and utility software packages don't currently support Vista while there are others that support it but don't recommend it. Microsoft claims Vista to be its most secure and most reliable operating system yet. However, even though Vista does have many wonderful new features and Microsoft fixed many of the most serious problems with Vista when it released Service Pack 1 a couple months ago, there continue to be many problems which Apple Macintosh commercials on television take great joy in poking fun at.

To confuse the issue Vista comes in several flavors: Home – like all Vista editions includes security, file sharing/network ability and a search engine but not many frills. Home Premium – entertainment oriented with games and the ability for working with photos, video and music. Business – all business, void of entertainment features. Ultimate – combines all versions features from entertainment to business.

Probably the most serious problems we have seen to date with Vista were problems that still have NOT been totally resolved that surround the new 'improved' file sharing abilities causing file access over networks to sometimes be unbearably SLOW. In a single computer office, this would not be an issue. Microsoft continues to address the problems and in time will release a patch to resolve the remaining serious issues. Industry experts have stated that primarily small businesses continue to be slow to adopt Vista whole heartedly, many choosing to remain with their currently functioning XP machines no doubt citing the old adage "If it ain't broke don't fix it".

Vista has taken some steps forward in security, safeguarding data, and in speedy indexing and accessing of data. Many high end users would dispute claims of improvement by pointing out the steps taken backwards, like the missing OpenGL graphics support for high end graphics applications. Others will espouse their love of the new AeroGlass screen look. Vista is very pleasing to the eye and the new 'SuperFetch' technology (more application data can be actively cached into all available memory to be virtually instantly available) significantly boosts speed and performance.

The new 'ReadyBoost' feature allows Vista to use the memory on a USB Flash Drive or any available RAM memory to boost performance and minimize delays. For example, while on a trip, we recently watched a television show over the internet on a laptop computer running Vista without the annoying pauses, glitching and hesitations previously experienced while using XP. This was accomplished by plugging a USB flash drive into the laptop and letting the new ReadyBoost and SuperFetch technologies built into Vista give us a nice smooth full screen presentation.

If the software and peripheral hardware you regularly use and need do not have problems with Vista, then particularly after the recent release of Service Pack 1, I don't personally see any reason to hesitate updating to Vista.

We currently use both Vista and WindowsXP in our offices. However, I would point out we have found some hardware items and some software programs, usually graphics or video oriented, that don't like Vista and require XP. A number of our customers are using Vista satisfactorily. For now, in our office, we will delay a total switchover to Vista probably until after the Vista Service Pack 2 is released. As with Windows 95 and Windows 98 before her, WindowsXP wasn't really good until after Service Pack 2 was released. I would expect non-less from Vista.

Q. With all the problems I hear about Vista, is there a way to have both XP an Vista on my computer?

A. Yes, it is possible to setup a computer to provide a dual boot choice. That is, a startup screen that will allow the user an option each time the computer starts to select from two operating systems. This is usually accomplished by partitioning the hard drive to create what amounts to two computers in one, the user can boot the machine to run Vista or XP. Some prefer to actually have physically separate hard drives. While both operating systems are still available, this can be done.

Even when XP has disappeared from Best Buy and other consumer electronics stores the end of June 2008, Microsoft has announced that authorized OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) computer system builders can continue to offer the unadvertised Microsoft Vista 'downgrade' option with a new computer purchase (usually for a nominal additional fee). With purchase of Vista Business, Enterprise or Ultimate Editions, one may opt to have a fully licensed legal copy of WindowsXP installed on the new computer instead. The installation disk and Key Code for Vista are provided so it may be installed at a later date if desired. If this transition is delayed until the release of service pack 2, then the install could be followed up with an upgrade to the newer service pack via the Internet. Some of these companies can even be persuaded, for a fee, to partition the drive and/or install both as mentioned earlier.

The problem with installing both XP and Vista from the 'downgrade' package is that Microsoft requires that only one be installed at a time. In other words, the user can run XP then later scratch it in favor of Windows Vista. So, in a partitioned hard drive or dual boot scenario, each side must be considered a separate computer with separate licensing requirements. If the 'downgrade' package is to serve for the XP side, then the user would need to purchase a separate Windows Vista with it's own Key Code for the second boot choice.

I recently ordered myself a new Vista machine with this WindowsXP downgrade option, then setup the computer to give me a choice at startup for which operating system I want to run. For new product development, prototyping and testing, Vista is my choice. But, some of the older programs I want to run won't operate properly under Vista, so I simply choose WindowsXP on startup when wanting to run those programs.

A recent Microsoft official press release stated, "Microsoft continues to be excited about the progress of Windows Vista® and its promise to be the most widely used operating system. At the same time, we recognize that some of our customers need additional time to make the transition to Windows Vista, our most secure and most reliable operating system. This is especially true for our small business and emerging market customers.

"End User Downgrade Rights (Windows Vista Business/Ultimate Editions): OEMs' ability to provide an OEM Activation (OA) enabled Windows XP recovery disk either: 1) in the system packaging with an OA-enabled Windows Vista Business/Ultimate system; or, 2) to an End User with such a Windows Vista system upon request, is being extended through January 31, 2009. The previous end date was July 31, 2008."

A WindowsXP startup edition remains available for some low end limited function machines. But for all other Windows XP products, the End of Life date for the System Builder Channel is January 31, 2009. Microsoft has announced that they will continue to support Windows XP until April 8, 2014 under their Extended Support Policy. But, the consumer will no longer be able to walk into a local computer store and purchase a boxed version of WindowsXP after June 30, 2008. Microsoft will not extend product support for Windows XP products beyond currently published dates.

See http://support.microsoft.com/gp/lifeselectwin for more details.