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## Don't pay for software you don't need



By Woody Leonhard

**If you've moved to Windows 7, there's a raft of software — entire *categories* of software — that you simply don't need.**

Why pay for it?

Many people write to ask me for recommendations about antivirus software, or utility programs, or Registry cleaners, or backup programs. They cite comparative reviews — even articles that I wrote a few years ago — debating the merits and flaws of various packages. Time and again, I have to tell them that all the information they know is wrong. On second thought, I guess the accumulated knowledge isn't so much wrong as obsolete.

The simple fact is, if you moved up to Windows 7, you wouldn't need a lot of that stuff — and the old reviews are just that. Old reviews.

I'm considered a heretic in some circles because I have extreme views when it comes to installing software on my Win7 machines. Even if I don't have to pay for it, I don't want a new program unless it solves a specific problem that bedevils me. And as for paying money for old packages — even good old packages — sorry, but I won't do it. I recommend that you don't, either.

In this column, and my next two columns, I'm going to lay it on the line — point out what you don't need, in my considered opinion — and try to save you a bunch of money. Senior Editor Fred Langa disagrees with several of my recommendations, as do many other knowledgeable people in the industry. Fred and others will present their counterpoints as the series develops, in articles here in the newsletter and in the Lounge. Should be an interesting meeting of the minds.

This week, I'd like to inflict on you my personal biases concerning four different groups of Windows software: antivirus, defraggers, backup programs, and Office productivity software. I look at all four specifically from a Windows 7 point of view. XP's a whole different kettle of decade-old fish.

Here's the dirty truth behind four big-time software industries — what you, as a Win7 user, need to know, to save yourself a ton of money and many, many Excedrin-size headaches.

### Paying for antivirus doesn't improve protection

I've been recommending free antivirus software since the second edition of *Windows XP All-In-One For Dummies*, nearly a decade ago. I've drawn the wrath of many a player in the billion-dollar AV industry, but I still say there's absolutely no reason at all to pay for antivirus protection.

Back in XP times, I recommended AVG Free, Avira, ESET's NOD32, and the like — many of those products were, and still are, free for personal use. That's changed. Starting with the second edition of *Windows 7 All-In-One For Dummies*, I've stopped recommending any third-party antivirus software. Why? Because Microsoft makes a first-rate AV product that's absolutely free for anyone with a genuine copy of Windows. It's also free for organizations of 10 or fewer people.

Microsoft Security Essentials ([download page](#)) goes in easily, runs quietly, needs no tending, and catches as many infectious programs as any of the big-name antivirus products. And it's free. Fred Langa has a full description in his May 6, 2010, [Top Story](#), "The 120-day Microsoft security suite test drive."

I've heard all the arguments against Microsoft Security Essentials. Yes, it's like asking the fox to guard the

chicken coop. But in this case, MSE's one fine fox.

MSE doesn't catch all the nasties, all the time. No AV product does. If you shoot yourself in the foot and wittingly install a rogue anti-malware program, for example, MSE may not keep you from pulling the trigger. In desperate situations, you may need a special-purpose program such as [Malwarebytes](#) to cleanse your system. But for everyday use, MSE works as well as any of the big-name, expensive, constantly money-grubbing packages. Get rid of 'em.

The only downside to installing MSE? You have to figure out how to completely remove the antivirus program you have now. Good luck.

## You don't need to defrag your drives any more

I've written hundreds of pages about hard-drive fragmentation. Because of the way Windows stores data on a drive and reclaims the areas left behind when deleting data, your drives can start to look like a patchwork quilt, with data scattered all over the place. Defragmentation reorganizes the data, plucking data off the drive and putting files back together again, ostensibly to speed up hard-drive access.

Although it's true that horribly fragmented hard drives — many of them hand-crafted by defrag software companies trying to prove their worth — run slower than defragged drives, in practice the differences aren't that remarkable, particularly if you defrag your hard drives every month or two or six. (Note that you should never defrag a solid-state drive.) In practice, even moderately bad fragmentation doesn't make a noticeable difference in performance, although running a defrag every now and again helps.

With Windows 7, you don't need to run a defrag. Ever. Windows runs one for you, by default, one day every week at 1:00 a.m. You can double-check to make sure that your machine's running defrags automatically: click Start, All Programs, Accessories, System Tools, Task Scheduler. On the left (see Figure 1), navigate to Task Scheduler Library, Microsoft, Windows, Defrag, and look for the ScheduledDefrag activity.

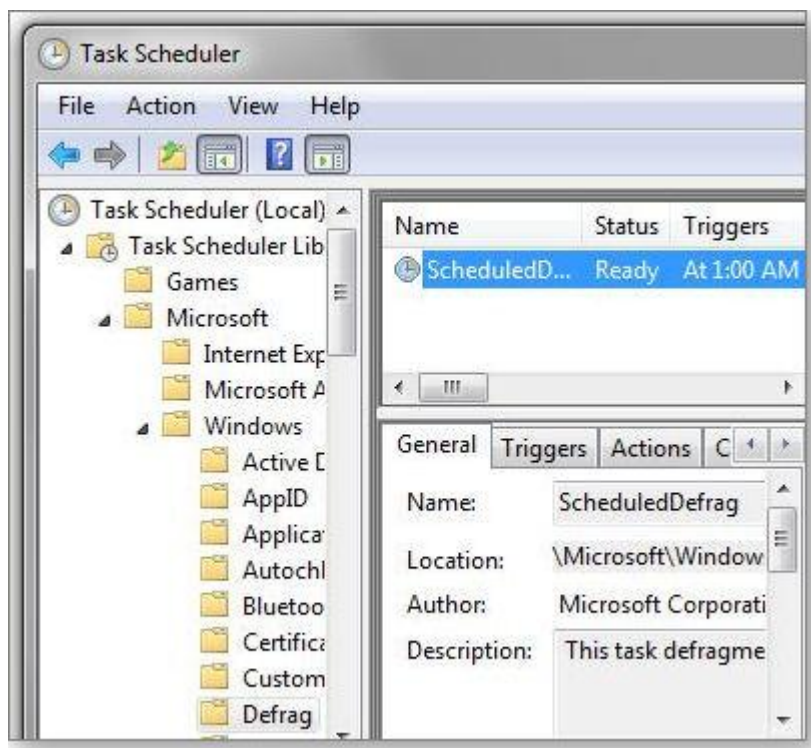


Figure 1. By default, Windows 7 runs a scheduled defrag once a week at 1:00 a.m.

To see when your hard drives have been defragmented, choose Start, All Programs, Accessories, System Tools, Disk Defragmenter. The Disk Defragmenter dialog box tells you when your drives were defragged and how badly they were fragmented at the last calculation point. From that dialog box, you can manually inspect your drives and run a defrag, if you feel so inclined.

Some companies would have you believe that their defraggers work better than Microsoft's. I say pshaw. (That's a technical term.) I've never seen any perceptible difference between MS and for-pay defraggers on a real-world Win7 machine, properly configured. Defraggers are just a waste of money.

## Drop your old backup program and use Win7's

I'm going to get howls over this one. In my opinion, if you have Windows 7, you have all the backup horsepower you need.

Windows XP's built-in backup program didn't. Didn't back up, that is. Something of a shortcoming for a backup program, eh? Vista's worked better, and Win7's works well.

Windows 7 has full support for four different kinds of backups:

- **Shadow copies**, also known as *previous versions*. Win7 maintains snapshots of your data files, taken every night around midnight. I'm amazed that more Win7 users don't realize they already have most of the vaunted Mac "Time Machine" features, built into Win7. To see the previous versions of your data files, click Start and then Documents. In Documents, navigate to the file that you'd like to resurrect. Right-click on the filename and choose Restore Previous versions. You see all of the stored shadow copies of that particular document, and it's easy to restore them.
- **Data backups** Setting up data backups is amazingly easy, although there's a little trick. If you're running Windows 7 Professional (or Ultimate) and you have a network, you can put your data backups on a network drive. To do so, click Start, Accessories, Getting Started. Click **Back up your files**, and follow the instructions. If you're running Win7 Home Premium or you don't have a network, your best bet is to buy an external hard drive for backups. (Two-TB drives cost about a hundred bucks.) Plug the external drive into a USB port, choose the **Use the Drive for Backup** option, and follow the instructions.
- **System restore points** Just like Windows XP and Vista, Win7 has tools to set up, manage, and use system restore points. See Microsoft's [FAQ](#) for details.
- **"Ghost" system images** Windows 7 also makes it easy to make a copy of your entire hard drive, a so-called image backup or **ghost**. To ghost your hard drive, click Start, All Programs, Accessories, Getting Started, **Back up your files**. Then in the upper-left corner, click the link to **Create a system image**.

Win7 makes shadow copies and data backups automatically, following the instructions you give when you first run the backup programs. It's easy, fast, and built into Windows. Of course, you need to figure out how often to run the backups, how to create full ghost images, and how to find and restore the right backups, but all of the pieces are there — and they don't cost a penny.

There are some situations in which you might want to pay for backup software. If you have several computers on a network and want to back them all up to one single location, a Windows Home Server or Network Attached Storage box with integrated Windows backup software may be better than backing up each machine individually. Cloud-based backup is good and getting better. But for most people, Windows 7's backup software does everything they need.

By the way, when Windows 8 starts gathering steam, you're going to see a lot of marketing puffery about

Microsoft's new "History Vault" — which many people are already comparing to the Mac's "Time Machine." When you see the new, whiz-bang demos, remember: Windows 7 already has shadow copies, fully incremental data backups, and all of the glue to get them together. The user interface isn't particularly snazzy, but all of the pieces are already there.

## **OpenOffice is not a slam-dunk replacement**

Whenever somebody asks me, "Why do you recommend Office when OpenOffice does everything for free?" I have to cringe. It's true that Microsoft Office is enormously expensive. It's also true that good, but not great, alternatives exist — including Google Docs, among many others.

There are two substantial problems.

First, as much as I would love to recommend a free replacement for Word, Excel, PowerPoint, or Outlook, the simple fact is that the free alternatives aren't 100-percent compatible. In fact, for anything except the simplest formatting, and most basic features, they aren't compatible at all. Even Microsoft's free [Office Web Apps](#) don't come close to the real Word, Excel, or PowerPoint. If your needs are modest, by all means explore the alternatives. But if you have to edit a document that somebody else is going to use, and it has any unusual formatting, you may end up with an unusable mess.

Second, many people don't realize it, but OpenOffice.org isn't the same organization it used to be. There's a long, sordid story involved, but give or take a twist, it goes something like this. Once upon a time, a company called StarDivision built an office program called StarOffice. Sun Microsystems bought StarDivision in August 1999 and, about a year later, released the StarOffice source code, turning it into the open-source product known as OpenOffice.org. Sun continued to support the OpenOffice.org effort by employing many of the developers; Novell, Red Hat, IBM, Google, and other companies also loaned their employees to the effort.

Then Oracle bought out Sun and started to do some not-very-funny things with the OpenOffice.org effort. Oracle tried to sell a variant of OpenOffice.org. Oracle yanked the free ODF plug-in that allows older versions of MS Office to read OpenOffice docs and slapped a horrendous price on it. There was a very nasty falling out, with dozens of key OpenOffice developers very publicly lambasting Oracle and then forming a new organization called LibreOffice. The LibreOffice folks forked the code and have, at this point, released two new minor versions that are not associated with OpenOffice.org or Oracle.

As reported in an April 21 InfoWorld [story](#), Oracle announced that it's going to hand over the OpenOffice code to "a purely community-based open-source project." That project hasn't yet been identified, and it isn't clear whether LibreOffice will absorb some or all of the code.

For all of those reasons, OpenOffice.org isn't a real or good alternative to Microsoft Office right now. So if you're looking for a way to avoid paying for Office, be assured that you aren't alone in the search. But the situation's still too murky for me to make any good recommendations yet.

Stay tuned.

### **Note added by Hottman Computers:**

**If you purchase a new computer, that comes preloaded with Office 2010, you have the option of using Word and Excel Starter editions free, no time limits.**

## Don't pay for software you don't need — Part 2



By Woody Leonhard

**After the first article of this three-part series appeared, many of you wrote to ask: do I *really* not need this software?**

It's true: if you've moved up to Windows 7, there are all sorts of software that you just don't need. Stop following outdated advice and get with the system!

In my previous [installment](#), I wrote that Windows 7 owners don't need to pay for any of these important apps:

**Antivirus software:** Microsoft Security Essentials is free, and for the average PC user, works just as well as the paid products — sometimes better.

**Defraggers:** Windows 7 defragments your drives automatically (once a week by default), and you don't need to lift a finger or spend a sou.

**Backup packages:** Win7 backup isn't particularly neat or fancy, but it covers the bases automatically and (almost always) works well. Fred Langa's May 12 [Top Story](#) shows you how to set up and run Win7's backup.

You may or may not want to shell out shekels for Microsoft Office, but that really depends on the level of document compatibility you need and on your willingness to suffer the slings and arrows of the current OpenOffice/LibreOffice debacle. It's a complex and costly problem. (A Feb. 16 InfoWorld [article](#) covers this in detail.)

This week, I'm going to gore a few more sacred (cash) cows. Specifically, I explain why I think Registry cleaners are worse than useless, why most people don't need partition software, and why there's no reason to pay for a firewall. I can hear the howls already. (Those PC users who do need a partition manager should read Lincoln Spector's [story](#), "Four free hard-drive maintenance tools," in the paid portion of this newsletter.)

Trust me regarding these applications: their time has come and gone. Save your money. Buy a bigger monitor, faster Internet, a comfy Aeron chair; upgrade to an Android phone or iPad 2 — things that will make an obvious difference to you.

In Part 3 of this series, I'll talk about saving money on Windows and MS Office — it makes absolutely no sense to pay for more than you need — and take some parting shots at expensive cables, obscure Windows services, and a few other items I love to lambaste. Stay tuned.

### Some Registry cleaners do more harm than good

I'm going to get a lot of flak over this one, but I've never seen a real-world example of a Windows 7 machine that improved in any significant way after running a Registry cleaner. As with defraggers, Registry cleaners may have served a useful purpose for Windows XP, but with Windows 7 I think they're useless (correction: worse than useless).

Senior Editor Fred Langa and I don't yet agree on this point: Fred suspects that Registry cleaners may be useful for some Windows 7 owners, some of the time. He's running a series of experiments right now, and we hope to see the results in a couple of weeks. But in my experience, working with hundreds of Windows 7 machines in all sorts of environments, I've never found a single run of a single Registry cleaner that caused anything but grief.

There's a great quote that (as best I can tell) originated on the [DSLReports forum](#) in March 2005. A poster

who goes by the handle "jabarnut" states, "The Registry is an enormous database, and all this **cleaning** really doesn't amount to much ... I've said this before, but I liken it to sweeping out one parking space in a parking lot the size of Montana." And that's the long and short of it.

Jabarnut is correct: the Registry is a giant database — a particularly simple one. As with all big databases, sooner or later some of the entries get stale; they refer to programs that have been deleted from the system or to settings for obsolete versions of programs. Sure, you can go in and clean up the pointers that lead nowhere, but why bother?

I'm ready to change my tune if Fred can find a Registry cleaner that reduces the size of a typical Registry by, oh, 15 percent to 20 percent (that's the point where I assume a decrease in size could improve system performance), or if he can find a slick way to speed up a system by 10 percent to 15 percent. Failing that, it's hard for me to imagine paying any money — or wasting any of my time — cleaning my Registry.

More important, Registry cleaners are notorious for messing up systems by **cleaning** things that shouldn't be touched. My favorite example: a free Registry cleaner called [EasyCleaner](#), which we at Windows Secrets Newsletter recommended some years ago. It was an excellent program, possibly best in its class, but it doesn't appear to have been updated in a long time. If you follow the list of fixes during EasyCleaner's waning years, you'll see that the authors went through a litany of mistakes, instances where the cleaner borked programs by deleting required Registry entries.

Reader DBB wrote to me recently, asking why Microsoft had abandoned its Registry cleaners. Windows Live OneCare (a precursor to Microsoft Security Essentials) included a much-ballyhooed online scanner and Registry cleaner, and a Microsoft U.K. [page](#) still lists an included Registry cleaner.

DBB notes, "The mystery is that, though Microsoft has not denounced the use of registry cleaners, it no longer provides one — at least for now. Previous to the online scanner, Microsoft provided **reg clean** and then **scan reg**."

He's absolutely right: Microsoft used to offer Registry scanners and cleaners. It doesn't have separate programs to perform those functions any more.

In my experience, the vast majority of Registry cleaners available now are either scareware come-ons or destructive — or both. Websites invite you to run a free Registry cleaning, they hit you with the rogue-anti-malware shtick, and then they ask for money. One Registry-cleaner site even uses "Microsoft" in its Web address; I have no idea why Microsoft doesn't take the site down.

DBB blames Microsoft for backpedaling — first it distributed and recommended Registry cleaners, now it's mum on the subject. DBB asks several interesting questions: Why doesn't Microsoft just come out and say you don't need a Registry cleaner? Why doesn't MS go after the people who claim to sell **Microsoft** Registry cleaners — when the cleaners don't come from Microsoft? Most important, why doesn't MS come out and clearly say that you shouldn't install or use a Registry cleaner — whether it's from Microsoft or not?

All good questions.

## Win7 does all the disk partitioning you'll need

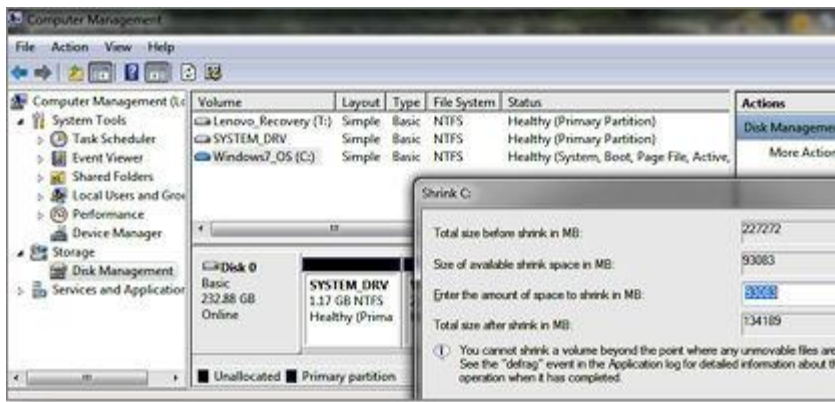
I personally hate disk partitioning. I've railed against it for years. But rather than get into a technical argument (yes, I know that dual-boot systems with a single hard drive need multiple partitions), I'll limit myself to extolling the virtues of Windows 7's partition manager.

No, Windows 7 doesn't have a full-fledged disk-partition manager. But it does everything with partitions that most people need — and it gets the job done without messing up your hard drive. Which is more than I can say for some third-party disk-partition managers.



Finding Windows 7's partition manager takes a little digging. Running in an administrator-level account, click Start, Control Panel, System and Security, and Administrative Tools. Next, double-click Computer Management. In the left panel, under Storage, click Disk Management.

If you don't have enough unallocated space to create a new partition, you have to **shrink** one or more of the existing partitions. To do that, right-click on the partition you want to shrink and choose Shrink Volume. Figure 1 shows the box in which you set the new size.



**Figure 1. Shrinking a partition is easy in Windows 7 — no extra software required.**

Type the amount of space you want to shave off the partition, and click OK.

You create a new partition by right-clicking the unallocated space and choosing New Simple Volume; a wizard pops up that steps you through set up and formatting.

If your hard drive is very nearly full, third-party partition software may make it a touch easier to repartition a hard drive because some third-party tools allow you to keep and move files while changing partitions — something Win7's native utility doesn't allow. For most PC users, that isn't much of a reason to spend money on a partition package.

## Windows 7's firewall works only one way

Like its predecessors, Windows 7's firewall only keeps outside threats from getting in — it's an **inbound** firewall. Outbound firewalls alert you when an unauthorized program attempts to send data out of your computer. At least that's the theory. In practice, many outbound firewalls bother you mercilessly with inscrutable warnings saying that obscure processes are trying to send out data.

If you simply click through and let the program phone home, you're defeating the purpose of the outbound firewall. On the other hand, if you take the time to track down every single outbound event warning, you might spend half your life chasing firewall snipes.

Some people think an inbound-only firewall is woefully inadequate. I think it's good enough for almost everybody. Fred wrote about outbound firewalls in his March 17 LangaList Plus [column](#). He, too, feels that an outbound firewall is usually overkill. But if you really want one, he recommends Sphinx Software's Windows Firewall Control ([info](#)), a product that helps you tweak the Windows firewall so it works outbound. You can download a limited-capability free version or the more powerful Plus edition (U.S. \$30).

I have a few friends who insist on running an outbound firewall. They uniformly recommend Comodo Firewall, which is also available in a free-for-personal-use [version](#).

I think it's all a complete waste of time. Although I'm sure some people have been alerted to Windows 7 infections when their outbound firewall goes bananas, 99.99 percent of the time the outbound warnings are just noise. Outbound firewalls don't catch the cleverest malware, anyway.

So that's Round 2 in the list of software that Windows 7 users don't need to buy, don't even need to bother with. It's surprising how much old advice isn't valid any more, eh?