

(How to avoid the...)

Top 15 Computer Blunders

(2011 Edition)

by Rich Pryor

A [SelfGeek.com](http://www.selfgeek.com) publication

From the Author of:



[Computer Secrets Unleashed!](#)

The latest version of this report can be downloaded at:

<http://www.selfgeek.com/Top-Computer-Blunders.html>

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Published by:
Hana Bound LLC
PO Box 406
Wellborn, Texas 77881 USA
<http://www.hanabound.com>
Sixth Edition – 02/15/11

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Introduction

Welcome to the sixth edition of *Top Computer Blunders*. Over the past several years, many thousands of people have downloaded this report, and I am pleased that you have joined them. As an Information Technology (I.T.) Consultant for nearly 20 years, I am continually amazed at how much of my job is simple repetition. You may have heard of the “80-20” rule, which states that for many events, 80% of the effects comes from 20% of the causes. Computers are no different – by being proactive on just a few problems, you can avoid the vast majority of problems with your computer. In this special report I will identify for you what I believe those *Top Computer Blunders*.

I am pleased to be able to share this information with you, and hope you will find it valuable. For more, please visit my websites at <http://www.SelfGeek.com> and <http://www.Computer-Secrets-Unleashed.com>.

Rich Tracy

Blunder #1: Buying the Wrong Computer

Many people rush out and buy a computer at their local chain electronics or office supply store. However, this can be very problematic. Even if you are only using your computer for a “home” computer, you are usually better off buying a business class computer. Manufacturers provide better technical support to their business customers, as they know that is their “bread and butter”. Also, units bought at a chain store are often underpowered and usually contain trial versions of Microsoft Office, which artificially lowers the price at the time of purchase.

I always recommend buying a computer made for business, such as those through Dell's Small Business Division. These units provide great value for your money and you get North American based technical support. To see my current model and configuration recommendations, see [this page](#) on my SelfGeek.com site. Or you can go directly to the Dell Deals sites for [desktops](#) or [laptops](#) if you prefer.

Speaking of laptops - many people buy a laptop when they really don't need one. The portability of laptops is nice, but it comes at a price. The initial purchase is more expensive and they are more likely to break down faster than desktops, in my experience. If you are going to travel with your computer, don't hesitate to get one; but if your computer is going to sit on your desk at home, save a little money and get a desktop with a nice flat panel monitor.

Blunder #2: Buying a new computer when you could inexpensively upgrade.

It may very well be time for a new computer if yours is several years old. But there are a couple inexpensive upgrades that can go a long way towards increasing your performance. As important as computers are in our daily lives, it is important that you have one that performs well. But, if you are on a budget you can always invest a little money into your current computer while you save money for a new one.

As of this writing in early 2011, RAM upgrades are very inexpensive. For most systems, you can double or triple the amount of RAM in your system for \$50-\$75. Check out the very cool [Crucial System Analyzer](#) that will analyze your system and tell you how much RAM you have and what your upgrade options are. It is a free tool, and I highly recommend you check it out.

If you are running out of disk space, it is a simple matter to add a second hard drive to most desktop computers. If you do not have room for a second internal drive, these days you can inexpensive (\$100 for 500Gigs or so) external USB hard drives which are very easy to install. These provide additional storage space AND a simple way to back up your system. If you have a laptop, replacing the hard drive is more complicated; you will have to back up your data, install the new drive, reinstall your operating system, and restore your data. For that reason, you should consider buying an inexpensive external USB hard drive and moving some of your existing data from the laptop hard drive to it instead.

Blunder #3: Tolerating a slow computer when a few tweaks could speed it up.

There are a handful of simple, easy, and free procedures that you can perform on any computer that will make a noticeable difference in speed. Simple procedures such as defragmenting, deleting temp files, etc. are easy to do and really make a difference. For a complete recipe for computer maintenance, check out the [Computer Secrets Unleashed](#). There are lots of other free tips at my [SelfGeek.com](#) site.

Blunder #4: Allowing your computer to be infected with viruses, spyware, malware.

There is no excuse for allowing your computer to become infected by any of these pests. There are FREE versions of tools that will adequately handle the removal of all of these. Believe me, if you get infected by one of these, you'll be paying somebody a lot of money to clean it up for you.

If you want professional grade tools and features, don't think you have to pay big bucks for products such as Norton, Symantec or McAfee. In fact, I strongly recommend you do NOT use these products, as they are, in my opinion, bloated, memory hungry programs that cause more trouble than they prevent. If your system is running slow, you may be surprised how much you can speed it up by uninstalling these products and installing something else instead.

When it comes to anti-virus, I recommend one of two FREE products that work just as well as the paid products on the market. The first is [Microsoft Security Essentials](#). If you are looking for a very unobtrusive program, MSE is the one for you. The second option would be [AVG Anti-Virus Free Edition](#), which is available free for personal home (non-commercial) use. In addition, there are numerous free anti-spyware and anti-malware tools that do not hog memory and do a great job of keeping the junk off your system. See the Internet Security section of [Free Software Unleashed](#) for details.

Blunder #5: Not protecting your computer with a firewall.

The Internet is a dangerous place. Exposing your computer to it without protection is like walking down a dark alley in the worst part of town at midnight. If you don't have a router with a hardware firewall built in (see below), you must have a good software firewall in place. Laptops always need a firewall, because when you are surfing wireless in public, you don't know whether there is a hardware firewall or not.

The firewall included in Windows 7 and Windows Vista is quite good. If you are running Vista and have your firewall enabled, you are covered in this area. The

Windows firewall built into Windows XP SP2 (and later) is better than nothing, but not good enough because it looks for inbound traffic only. If you have a laptop, my current recommendation for a firewall is the free [Comodo Firewall](#). Comodo has recently added anti-virus protection to their firewall package, however their anti-virus product has not gotten as good of scores as AVG and MSE. Since it is a bad idea to have more than one anti-virus software installed, be sure to uncheck the option for anti-virus during install if you already have AVG or another anti-virus program on your machine.

Blunder #6: Not having a good, automatic backup system in place.

“It's not IF you'll lose your data, it's WHEN you'll lose your data.” This is absolutely correct. I have never had a single client who didn't have to depend on their backup sooner or later. If you do not have a backup in place, don't wait a minute longer.

A good backup should be automatic and hands off, so you don't have to remember to back up. Human nature is what it will, and many people end up forgetting to do the backup. It is much better to just let the computer kick it off automatically every morning at 2:00 am for example.

This is all cheaper than you think. For as little as \$20 you can get great backup software such as [Backup4All](#). While I used to recommend burning backups to CD or DVD, I now recommend an inexpensive (<\$100) external USB hard drive.

Another good option is online backup services such as [Carbonite](#). For \$55/year, Carbonite will backup an unlimited amount of data. I even sign my commercial clients up for Carbonite as a secondary backup to their local backups. Why not for a measly \$55/year? Once installed, Carbonite just silently monitors your system and backs up any new or changed files automatically. It is awesome, and I strongly recommend it for everyone.

The SelfGeek Manifesto includes a complete backup plan that anyone can implement using free tools and inexpensive hardware. Because I feel very strongly that everyone has a good backup, I now give this chapter away on my website free – check out the [Poor Man's Backup Plan](#).

Blunder #7: Paying for software when good free software exists.

There is plenty of freeware or open source software available to perform a variety of tasks. Often times commercial products can get bloated and buggy. I always look for a well-supported and highly rated program from a smaller publisher before buying a big commercial package. Sites such as Download.com and SourceForge are a great place to start looking.

I also have a large list of free software programs that I use and recommend available on my website, and you may also be interested in one of my other free reports called [Free Software Unleashed!](#)

Blunder #8: Letting your computer die in power surges.

Between thunderstorms and the increasing instability of the power grid, it seems like I am having more and more problems with power surges and brown-outs damaging equipment. For around \$50, you can buy an Uninterruptible Power Supply (aka UPS or “battery backup”) that will run your computer for 10-15 minutes or more after the power goes out. These are inexpensive insurance! Larger computers such as servers absolutely MUST have one – and I also recommend putting one on your networking equipment (cable/DSL modem and router).

You can buy these online or pick one up at your local office supply or electronics retailer.

Blunder #9: Not sharing and backing up photos properly.

In the age of digital photos, many people have hundreds or thousands of pictures that are just sitting on their hard drive. It is easy to sign up for free services like [Picasa](#) (by Google) which allow you to share pictures with your friends or relatives. Picasa includes access to Picasa Web Albums. As soon as you import your pictures into Picasa, they are synced to your online Web Albums, where you can then easily share them with your friends and family. If you or they like, prints can be ordered of any or all of the pictures you upload. It couldn't be easier.

This is a true story: I have a new client who did great backups for many years. However, in the process of moving into a new home over the Christmas holidays, he let his backup routine go by the wayside. You guessed it – he had a hard drive crash in late

January and lost over 300 pictures, including all their Christmas pictures in their new house, and pictures of the first snowfall in this area in 20 years.

Don't let this happen to you! By regularly uploading your favorite pictures to Picasa, you are creating a backup in case you somehow lose your pictures. Of course, if you have a good backup in place, you will be backing up your pictures along with everything else, but when it comes to backups you can never have too many!

Blunder #10: Buying the wrong printer.

Most of the printers available at your local electronics or office supply store have features that you will never use. The installation routine adds several different programs that you might not even need. For most people, a simple black and white laser printer is adequate. Of all the printer manufacturers, I've had the most luck with [Hewlett Packard](#).

Color is expensive. The initial price of the printer is misleading, as the manufacturer uses it as a loss leader. In other words, they lose money selling the printer but know that they will make it up selling you ink or toner cartridges. Make sure you really need color before buying a color printer.

You may also be shocked to learn that inkjet printers will end up costing you MORE in the long run than a black and white laserjet printer. Additionally, laser printers are generally better-made and last longer than inkjet printers. Step up to a laser printer and you'll never go back to messy, expensive ink again!

In summary – buy the simplest (which is not always the cheapest) printer that meets your needs, and make sure you know how much the ink/toner costs before purchase so you can figure that into the total cost of ownership. Check out my [Printing FAQ](#) for more.

Blunder #11: Not taking advantage of inexpensive home fax/scan solutions.

While you're buying a printer, look for an “all-in-one” unit that includes a fax machine and scanning capabilities. Newer units support a phone company feature that allows you to have a separate fax number for just a few dollars a month. Hewlett Packard has some [great multi-function laser printers](#) that do a great job of this. These units are no more expensive than standard laser printers, and you get scan and fax capabilities as well. This allows you to scan documents and email them too!

Blunder #12: Not having a router.

If you have a broadband connection, you should have a router. Not only does it allow you to share your Internet connection among all your computers, but it will contain a hardware firewall to protect you from all the losers out there with nothing better to do than try to hack you. For around \$50 - \$70 you can pick up a Linksys by Cisco or Netgear unit that will do the trick. Most models include wireless Ethernet capabilities too, so your laptops won't be left out of the fun.

You might not need to purchase a router – your ISP might have taken care of it for you! Some broadband providers (particularly DSL) are now providing an all-in-one (modem/router/switch) with your broadband service. Ask your broadband provider for more details.

Blunder #13: Not networking your home computers.

If you have multiple computers at home, it is easy to network them together to share files, printers, and the Internet connection. Many people are intimidated by this, but it is really easy. [The SelfGeek Manifesto: Computer Secrets Unleashed Volume 2](#) covers this topic in great detail. Windows 7 includes a great new feature called “Homegroup” - check out more information at SelfGeek.com.

Blunder #14: Not securing your wireless network.

The default configuration of most routers will leave your wireless network exposed. Take the time to read the documentation and turn security on. There is an older wireless technology called “WEP” - it is out of date and not very secure. WEP is better than nothing – but just barely. Newer routers and laptops include WPA and WPA2 technology, which provides much higher encryption. The only downside to adding security is you will have to provide a key to any visitors who wish to access your network, but this is a small price to pay.

Blunder #15: Paying for remote access.

You have probably heard the commercials for products such as Go To My PC which allow you to take over your home or office computer and work remotely. Did you know that

similar technology is built in to many versions of Windows for free? Even if you don't have the right version of Windows, there is freeware software that does the same thing. Do not under any circumstances pay \$20+ a month for this capability when you can get it free! There is a complete tutorial on how to set this up in [The SelfGeek Manifesto: Computer Secrets Unleashed Volume Two](#).

Another great service I use all the time is [Mikogo](#). Mikogo is a completely free remote control screen sharing application. It allows you to remotely take over a friend or colleague's computer, and then assist them while both of you control the mouse and keyboard and see what is happening on the screen. I use Mikogo all the time to help people who don't have another option for remote access to their computer!

Blunder #16: Using Windows Vista

Here is a BONUS BLUNDER! I am sorry to say that I absolutely can not recommend Windows Vista. At the time the first version of Computer Secrets Unleashed came out, I was optimistic that Service Pack 1 of Vista would fix all the problems and woes users were experiencing. Sadly, this never materialized. Service Pack 1 came and went, but the advantages of Vista do not come near outweighing the frustrations associated with it.

Now that Windows 7 is out, there is no excuse not to upgrade! If you really want to read more on my feelings on Vista, you can read my [Vista FAQ](#).

Conclusion

I hope you have enjoyed this special report and it has taught you some important issues to address on your computer. Don't forget to check out <http://www.SelfGeek.com> and <http://www.Computer-Secrets-Unleashed.com> for assistance in avoiding all the blunders in this special report, and much, much more!

Cheers,

Rich Pryor

<http://SelfGeek.com>