

## **Firelight Newsflash! 1-February-2008**

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The edition of the newsletter has a special focus on computers and making them useful for your work.

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### **Four tips to extend your computer's life**

#### **1. Keep things clean.**

It's difficult to keep a computer functioning well if it lives in a poor environment. There are three factors to consider: air quality, electricity and temperature.

Computers generate a lot of heat and require good air circulation to prevent overheating. Your computer uses a fan to pull fresh air across its electronics, so it needs at least eight centimeters of free space around it to breath properly. The same is true for your monitor and printer.

Putting your computer in an office with a temperature between 15 and 29 degrees Celsius will help it stay cool.

Another thing to consider is dust. If your computer lives in a dusty area, consider checking its fans and blowing the dust out as part of your computer maintenance program.

Computers need a stable source of electricity. Unreliable power (frequent blackouts and fluctuations) can damage your computer and files. Far more damage, in fact, than most computer viruses.

Installing a backup power source (called an uninterruptible power supply or UPS for short) can help smooth out fluctuations and keep your computer insulated from unreliable power. A UPS is quite cheap compared to the cost of your computer and is well worth the money.

#### **2. Make things automatic.**

Your computer needs a little care and attention to keep it running smoothly. Sometimes in a busy organization, this gets overlooked. There are a few important day-to-day activities that you can automate:

- \* Virus protection updates
- \* Critical software updates

Even if your computer is not connected to the Internet, it can still become infected with a virus. Sometimes viruses hide in files given to you on a CD or a portable disk drive. A high-quality anti-virus program can keep you protected. Check to see that your anti-virus program is turned on, and is set to automatically update itself when you are connected to the Internet.

Another way to keep your computer running smoothly is to check for software updates every week. These updates often contain changes that improve your computer's security, and work together with your anti-virus program to keep your system safe and secure. For Microsoft products, you can use Windows Update (<http://www.update.microsoft.com>) to download and install updates automatically.

### 3. Perform preventative maintenance.

Once every few months you should consider running a disk cleanup program. For Windows XP it is called "Disk Cleanup" and is already installed on your computer. Use the "Help" menu to find it. It removes unneeded temporary files and reorganizes your computer's storage (using a process called "defragmentation") so it runs more smoothly. This program may take several hours to complete, so don't worry.

Every year you should check your computer's health by opening it and checking for dust and clogged fans. If you are uncomfortable doing any of this, you might wish to recruit a local computer specialist to come by and perform the work for you.

Turn your computer off. While looking at the rear of your computer, make a note of which cable plugs into which opening and unplug everything.

Open the case (don't try this on a laptop) and inspect the inner workings. Gently blow the dust out, or if you have an electric vacuum, vacuum the dust out. DO NOT touch the vacuum nozzle to the sensitive electronic components, just do your best to get the bulk of the dust out of the cabinet, and use your breath to blow dust off of the electronics.

Reassemble the computer and cables and turn everything on.

Another yearly maintenance activity involves checking your computer's disk for

errors. Your computer comes with a program called "Check Disk" or "CHKDSK" which analyzes and tries to correct any problems it finds.

If you are uncomfortable doing any of this, you might wish to recruit a local computer specialist to come by and perform the work for you.

#### 4. Commit to ongoing maintenance.

If your organization has many computers, you may find it challenging to consistently take time away from your mission to devote to maintenance. If this is the case, consider asking for help from a local technology service provider or an independent IT contractor.

A poorly functioning computer does not help you with your mission.

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### **Computer Basics**

The Network for Learning ([www.networklearning.org](http://www.networklearning.org)) has produced a manual called "How to Build a Good Small NGO." This manual includes an annex on computer basics that we found particularly helpful. It discusses how a computer can help you, or actually hinder your work. It contains information on viruses, organizing information, and recommended programs (including easy steps to use excel).

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### **Tech Tips from Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)**

<http://www.wougnat.org/Support/techtips.html>

Excellent resource that has information on topics such as virus prevention, backing up data, managing email, avoiding internet scams, starting on-line petitions, and much more.

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### **Obtaining computers**

We have looked for organizations that provide computers to non-profit organizations in Africa. Unfortunately, we have not been able to find any good resources. Many organizations that supply computers want to work mainly with larger NGOs, and often charge high shipping costs. If any of you know of any good resources for free or reduced cost computers, please let us know and we

will share them in another edition of the newsletter.

Organizations that supply computers, but charge shipping costs:

<http://www.computeraid.org/>

<http://www.worldcomputerexchange.org/>

<http://www.giftsinkind.org/charities/>