

Good days, bad days of the computer world

As I enter my 30th year in the information technology field so much has changed but some things still remain the same.

Computer systems are smaller, faster and cheaper but dealing with them can be rewarding and other times utterly frustrating.

Even now some days I have the touch of gold and can fix anything in minutes. But some late afternoon's I have the touch of death and systems die the second I lay my hands on the keyboard (overstated just a bit).

We all have good days and bad days. Mornings starting out great with everything humming along just fine but afternoons turn horrid, tortured by crashing systems and haunting spyware that never goes away. Software companies have those same days that can put someone on top of the world



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and others which make them swear off technology forever.

The people at ESet Nod32 Antivirus had one of those bad days a couple of weeks ago, and when they have a bad day, all their clients do. ESet makes about the best antivirus in the world and

my clients have a couple hundred workstations protected by their Nod32 Antivirus product.

We have had it operational at all Washington County offices for over a year, and the spyware infections have dropped dramatically. A couple of years ago I was constantly fighting spyware and malware at the sheriff's office, but after installing Nod32 Antivirus on all the PCs there last fall they have been mostly clean since.

The antivirus does such a good job because the analysts and programmers at ESet are constantly finding virus signatures, analyzing new destructive algorithms, and writing anti-virus updates. These critical updates are delivered at least once a day to all their hundreds of thousands of client workstations and servers around the world.

Well, on Sept. 3 a bad ESet Nod32 Antivirus update called 5418 went out and hung just about every computer they service, including all my clients' PCs running that software. My first call was from the sheriff's department telling me every computer is hung up, so I hauled tail over there to see what the problem was.

Luckily an error message was on most of the screens telling me it was an ESet Nod32 error so that told me it was most likely the universal culprit. Next I checked

the update time stamp and version number to start getting a handle on how widespread the problem might be. That's when I called a bank client here in town and found they were having the same problem.

After rebooting a couple of the sheriff's PCs I saw that the update version changed to the next number of 5419 but still had problems. So I rebooted my test computers a second time which made the new antivirus update take full effect thereby resolving the problem.

Knowing that I simply made sure other county personnel rebooted their computers twice, and the fix was automatically applied.

In other words, the yahoos at ESet sent out a bad update, screwed up hundreds of thousands of PCs, and then quickly shipped the fix for the update out six hours later to undo their massive "dooohhh!"

My morning was rough addressing that problem but not as bad as the technical debrief that guy at ESet had to give after his killer code took out their entire client base in a single keystroke.

Good days are when you easily and quickly fix something broken or release some nifty new software that people go "wow!" about. Google did just that last week when they enabled their new "Google Instant" search feature in the world's most popular search engine at Google.com.

Google Instant is a new feature that almost reads your mind as you type in keywords on a letter-by-letter basis. As you are typing, Google Instant does two things dynamically so you can see instant suggested keywords and initial results based on the few words or letters you have typed in at that time.

The second you type a recognizable word, syllable or acronym, Google Instant will show a dropdown with at least five suggested keyword searches below where you are typing. This can massively help you find what you are looking for by choosing one of these suggested keyword phrases on the fly.

These suggested keywords come from a complex algorithm which is based on other people's entries compared to what is out there on the Web. Odds are you are not the only person trying to find exactly what you are looking for at any given time. Google Instant utilizes that search data and uses that to provide you keyword suggestions on the fly.

Google Instant also quickly displays the search results while you are typing rather than wait-

ing for you to enter in your complete keyword phrase and hit the enter key. The website, URL, or Internet target may show up below even if you are just halfway through typing in your search phase or list of keywords.

The gurus at Google.com are claiming that this new feature will save you 2-5 seconds on each search or an overall time savings of 20 percent doing internet searches. A 20 percent savings in anything is a good thing.

Their key technical insight was that we type slowly, but read quickly, typically taking 300 milliseconds between keystrokes, but only 30 milliseconds to glance at another part of the page. With that math it only takes us 1/10th the time to look down at those dynamic and

quick results than it does to type more stuff in the computer.

With Google Instant's new techniques we now have smarter predictions displayed before we even know what we are looking for as we type. See what I mean about they're reading our minds now? Google had a good day when they released Google Instant and I was turned on by it right away.

Bottom line: Bad days like ESet had can be made up by great days Google just had, so smile and have a great day!

Next week's column: Snopes: Fact or fiction?

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