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A great little program that may fix your PC

I receive a lot of requests from readers and listeners (KLVI 560AM, Saturdays, 1-3 p.m.) asking about what causes the aggravating lockups, blue screens, page faults, illegal operations and other Windows software faults that most of us suffer with. While there is an endless variety of causes, and many seem nearly impossible to locate and fix, other than with trial and error (mostly "error"), I have found a useful and inexpensive utility that can locate hundreds of software problems and fix many of them.

The program is The Ultimate Troubleshooter, a British product available at www.answersthatwork.com for only \$20, with a limited free trial version available for download. This program is simple enough for a novice to use, and sophisticated enough for the most demanding IT professional or computer technician to utilize to diagnose those difficult problems. According to the authors, "A staggering 65 percent of problems which a PC encounters, whether in business or at home, are not caused by hardware problems, they are not caused by viruses, they are not caused by spam; they are caused by background tasks. From PC lock-ups to illegal operations, Internet Explorer crashes, slow-downs, and more ... a staggering 65 percent of problems are purely and simply down to what is running in the background on your PC. The trick to having a PC that runs smoothly most of the time is to know which background tasks are good, which are not, and which are needed only sometimes. We do."

After loading The Ultimate Troubleshooter, four headings appear below its toolbar. The headings are "Tasks running on this PC," "Services," "Hardware," and "Startups." The former shows all of the programs running on the computer, with much more information than a simple listing. Based on the extensive database compiled by the authors in their own computer service



Ira Wilsker

business, running tasks are color-coded green for OK; yellow for "user's choice"; red for "not OK," unnecessary or harmful; blue for "multiple possibilities"; and white for "unknown." By clicking on any running tasks, two windows on the bottom of the screen, labeled, "Our findings and our views on this task" and "Our recommendations" appear. The color-coding mentioned above is reflected here, along with a detailed explanation of the running task and recommendations on the task. If a task is unnecessary, right-clicking on the task will open a menu of options to control or delete the troublesome task.

"Services" are computer functions running in the background that may not be familiar programs, and may be drivers or libraries loaded by programs at boot or intentionally run. While some services are necessary Windows functions, many are loaded by user-installed software on the machine, and many services are major sources of conflicts, blue screens and lockups. The familiar color-coding system and explanation windows are utilized here, with a right-click of the mouse bringing up the control options.

"Hardware" shows an extremely detailed listing of all internal hardware and most of the peripherals connected to the computer. This information is necessary to locate updated drivers, software compatibility and maintenance functions.

"Startups" shows the software loaded when the computer is booted. While there are several third party utilities that can manage the startup process, and several (but not

all) versions of Windows have the poorly documented "msconfig" command, there are few other products on the market that show the startup list and indicate with the familiar color coding system the usefulness of the items. Again, with the right-click of the mouse and an "Apply Changes" button to confirm the selections, the startup process of the computer can be easily managed, eliminating unnecessary and possibly even dangerous startup items (such as viruses and Trojans!), which will both speed up the booting of the computer and reduce the number of potential conflicts.

There are some other helpful utilities in this fine program, including a housekeeping function. Many of us have a large amount of wasted hard drive space taken up by obsolete temporary files, browser caches and other useless clutter. The housekeeping function will detect and allow the user to delete these undesired files, often freeing up massive amounts of hard drive space.

The database used by The Ultimate Troubleshooter is frequently updated, and can be downloaded by clicking on Help — Check for updates.

The Web site at www.answersthatwork.com also has an extensive "Library of Answers That Work" and help files for a vast assortment of software, ranging from Windows 95 to XP Pro, Internet Explorer, Netscape, DOS, HP, Epson, Word, Novell, PC Anywhere and other popular titles. I would recommend that users review the offerings in the library. The library is composed of the problems that the technicians encountered when diagnosing thousands of computers, along with the solutions that they found, that worked.

I have found that for \$20, The Ultimate Troubleshooter is a vital and most useful utility that I will now use on a regular basis when trying to diagnose many of the computer problems that I am asked to deal with.

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