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Search Your Hard Drive in a Flash

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Search Your Hard Drive in a Flash

By Gerry Blackwell
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Many small businesses are now moving in to their second or even third decade of computerization. That means they have piles and piles of archival data. At the same time, hard drives are getting bigger and bigger and cheaper and cheaper, so the temptation is to keep all that stuff. Finding things fast on your computer or network becomes almost impossible.

Enter **X1 Technologies**.

X1's new X1 Search program (\$99) promises to do for personal computer hard disks what Google does for the Web.

It will find any word in any Outlook, Outlook Express, Eudora or Netscape e-mail message or attachment, any Outlook contact or any file on any local or network drive.

It displays a list of files or messages on one side of its screen and formatted content of the selected item on the other. It can even be configured to highlight search terms and scroll the display to the first instance of a search term.

And it does all this much, *much* quicker than native Windows Search or Outlook or Word search functions can. In fact, the company claims that in most cases the program will find content almost as fast you can type the search strings.

Shows all the Signs

Does X1 Search live up to the promise? Yes, and with few reservations. The only big ones are that it doesn't allow you to do Boolean searches à la Google — (e.g. cat OR feline OR tiger). And you cannot do searches on phrases. Yet.

Both these features will be added to the product soon, X1 says. And the program's search syntax does provide lots of flexibility in other ways.

Downloading and installing X1 Search went without a hitch. The download process is impressively slick and fast.

Before X1 Search can do what it does, it must first "index" the files on your hard drive. It begins this process as soon as you launch it for the first time. This caused a minor virus panic for me.

As part of the indexing process, it copies e-mail file attachments, including those in Outlook Express's Deleted Items folder, to a temporary X1 folder. When it copies an infected file — and my Deleted Items folder often contains messages with infected attachments — McAfee Virus Scan notices and reports.

The McAfee virus alerts I received appeared to be reporting infected files from the download of the X1 Search program.

The panic was brief. By the time I tried to delete the files, they were already gone from the X1 temp folder. And X1 spokesperson Stephan West responded immediately to my urgent e-mail and explained what was going on.

I subsequently emptied my Deleted Items folder, which I do periodically anyway. As West explained, you can also limit the indexing so X1 doesn't index messages in the Deleted Items folder.

If you have a big, crowded drive, the initial indexing takes quite a while. In my case, it took almost two hours. After that, the program indexes at regular intervals — which you can set separately for each type of searchable content — and takes only seconds or minutes.

While it's indexing, you can continue to work on the computer, but the program uses a lot of resources during this process, so things may slow down.

I also experienced minor glitches with a couple of programs during the initial indexing. One wouldn't respond, the other crashed — though, in fairness, it often crashes. In any case, these problems disappeared after the indexing procedure was complete.

X1 provides an excellent tutorial at its site and the program is both cleverly designed and intuitive.

And it works exactly as advertised. Key in a search term and the list of hits starts to assemble instantly. Add additional search terms and the list shrinks.

Familiar Phrases

The syntax will be familiar to users of Web search engines. One marked difference is that X1 will initially find any word that starts with the letters in your search term — "cat," for example, will turn up "catatonic" and "catchy". If you want just "cat," you must key in "cat=."

You can use the minus sign to exclude words as you can in Google and some other search engines. There is no equivalent to the plus sign (which forces Google to *only* return pages with that search term) because X1 will only return files or messages with all search terms entered in the main search field anyway.

Typing search terms in the main search field is just one way to zero in on content. In the left-hand panel of the main screen, which displays a list of files or messages found, you can type search terms in the fields above each column, or re-order the column to bring the item you want closer to the top.

In an e-mail search, for example, there are fields for From, To, Subject, Date, Folder, Size and more. If you remember that the message you want is quite large, you can click the column header to re-order by descending size to find your message.

Or if you remember it was one of the earliest messages you received on this subject, you could re-order messages by date and see them in ascending order which would put the oldest messages near the top of the list.

In a file search, there are columns for File name, Date, Size and Path — all of which can be searched or used to re-order the list of hits.

The program provides impressive flexibility in setting options — which types of files and messages it will index and from which locations, when it will index them on a regular basis, and so on.

These are important options to set correctly. I found that because there is so much cross on my hard drive — I don't clean it out as often as I should — searches inevitably find all kinds of things that were irrelevant, even though they met the search terms.

Making Contact

A nice feature for X1 to add: include Delete as a right-click menu option. If your search turns up a whole pile of files you'd forgotten were there and you now want to get rid of them, you could do it right in X1.

The program also lets you choose to have X1 docked to the top of your Windows screen and auto-hidden — meaning only the top section of the main screen displays and only when you move your cursor to the top of the screen.

One of the most appealing features of the program is the way it indexes Contacts from Outlook — not just contacts in the Address book, but contacts it extracts from messages. And when you find a contact, you can click a button to send that person a message or forward the information to somebody else.

The catch: it *only* works with Outlook for now — not Outlook Express or Eudora or Netscape. X1 is working on adding Contacts indexing for those programs as well.

X1 Search is an excellent product, and it will get even better when the company adds Boolean and phrase searching and indexing of contacts from e-mail clients other than Outlook.

Based in London, Canada, Gerry Blackwell has been writing about information technology and telecommunications for a variety of print and online publications since the 1980's. Just for fun, he also authors features and columns on digital photography for Here's How, a spiffy new Canadian consumer technology magazine. Blackwells knowledge is vast and his wit edging.

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