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Search-Boosters For Your PC

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A sub-\$500 desktop PC these days comes with a hard drive that has a capacity of at least 40 billion bytes -- room for the text of 13,000 copies of War and Peace. All that space means that anything you save, from Grandma's e-mail messages to a Web page for a quaint bed-and-breakfast, is likely to stay there forever. Good luck trying to find it.

While companies, led by Google, have turned Web search into a science, it remains painful to look for content stored on your own computer. Windows' built-in search will hunt through your disk -- slowly -- for a single word or phrase, but it doesn't search through saved e-mail messages. And the search function built into Microsoft Outlook (MSFT

) is even worse. It is extremely slow, and its poor design makes advanced features, such as limiting the search to a range of dates, almost unusable. (Searches on the Macintosh (AAPL

) are faster but not much better.)

Microsoft promises that all this will be fixed in the next version of Windows. Since that's two years away, however, I took a look at some products that can make searches easier and more convenient today.

X1 (\$99, 15-day free trial available) from X1 Technologies (x1.com) offers a lot of the capability that Windows leaves out. The first thing X1 does when you install it is build an index of all the text on your hard drive, a task that can take several hours. But once the index is complete, searches are blindingly fast, with the results appearing as quickly as you can type the query. The files or e-mail messages found are listed in a panel at the left of the X1 window, and the contents of the selected item are shown in the main window. X1 PROVIDES TABS for separately searching files, contacts, e-mail attachments, or messages (from Outlook, Outlook Express, Netscape (TWX

), or Eudora). Each tab offers appropriate search fields, such as "from" and "subject" for mail and "type" for files. Many file types, including those from Microsoft Office programs and PDF files, are displayed correctly formatted with the matches to your query highlighted. Double-click on an item, and it opens in the appropriate program.

X1 queries use the same syntax as Google, except that, unlike Google, the system doesn't let you search for an exact phrase by putting several words in quotes. An upcoming version should fix this and add the ability to search for documents containing any of several key words.

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Page 1 of 2

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If you want to search only e-mail messages in Outlook or Outlook Express, ISYS:email.search from Odyssey Development (isysemail.com) provides a less expensive (\$30, with a free 30-day trial) alternative. Like X1, it starts by indexing your mail. Its search capabilities are actually more refined than X1's, offering queries for exact phrases as well as for key words linked by "and," "or," or "not." You also can easily search by sender, recipient, or date range, but the lack of a way to search by attachment name is unfortunate.

Onfolio (\$80, with a 30-day free trial), from a company of the same name, is not really a search tool, but it can be a big help in making searches of the Web or of your computer more useful. It's an Internet Explorer add-on that acts as a sort of electronic scrapbook. After launching a Web search, you can save links to the Web pages you find, or copies of the pages themselves, in scrapbooks of information, along with related snippets from your hard drive. Another component of Onfolio makes it simple to assemble the collected data into a report. (A version without the report writer is available for \$30.)

The biggest drawback of both X1 and ISYS is that they are not integrated with either the e-mail programs or the operating system. You should be able to find a mail message or file by looking in your e-mail program or a directory window, not by firing up another application. But I don't have high hopes that Microsoft will ever get this right. Until they do, these programs are a helpful step in the right direction. For a collection of past columns and online-only reviews of technology products, click here By Stephen H. Wildstrom



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