A Technician's Toolkit: What's Inside the Bag

If you fix computers regularly (or you're the type that often fixes computers for friends and family), you've likely developed a collection of software and tools to help you fix things more efficiently. Since I ocasionally play technician myself, I thought I'd share with you some tools that make it easier to troubleshoot everyday PC problems.

Have a good collection of software

Quality software will help you diagnose and fix many problems. If someone needs Windows reinstalled and you don't have the CD, then what? You may want to purchase a CD binder to hold all your software. Here's a sampling of what you'll find in my kit:

> Two boot CDs with diagnostics programs
> Linux live CDs including Ubuntu and Knoppix
> three versions of Microsoft Office (including 2003)
> Windows 95, 98SE, 2000, XP Home and Pro (plus a special corporate licensed version)
> Applicable service packs and patches for each version Windows on one CD
> two CDs with various benchmarks on them
> Visual Studio .NET
> Three utility CDs with antivirus/antispyware programs and commonly used applications like Adobe Reader
> Norton Ghost
> Partition Magic
> Many more random disks

Carry common cords

> USB cable - The most common peripheral interface
> Firewire cable
> Standard PC power cord
> Ethernet cable (might want to carry 2-3 of these)
> Wireless USB adapter - Helps avoid having to run 30 feet of ethernet cable just to get a machine online. Why use cabling if there's a wireless network in the area?

A way to move and store files

Some use a thumbdrive on a keychain, but I find that the size limit of flash memory is to constrictive when working on a PC. I carry a 160GB firewire/usb external hard drive as part of my kit. That way, if I need to backup someone's files or I just want to work on something from another computer, I have everything at my fingertips.

A few screwdrivers and things...

Every PC technician carries their trusted phillips head screwdriver at all times, right? The standard size fits most desktop screws, but you may want to get a mini-screwdriver kit to work on laptops. Three-prong screw grabbers (or tweezers) are great for when you drop a screw into or underneath the motherboard. Alternatively, you could just get a magnetized screwdriver and pick screws up with it. Carrying a small flashlight will help you see into the dark recesses of the case, and needle-nose pliers come in handy for hard drive jumpers. Lastly, have a notepad, post-it notes and a few pens and pencils in there.

Useful testers

> Power Supply Tester
> Network cable tester
> Motherboard tester (usually PCI, outputs BIOS codes)

Get a good bag

How are you going to carry all this around? In a good bag of course. I use a mid-sized briefcase, but any tough duffel will do.

These are the basics for day-to-day troubleshooting. For those performing more advanced diagnostic procedures, I might also recommend a soldering iron. You might also want to try carrying an iPod (or any music player) - but not for technical reasons. It provides an excellent source of entertainment while you're watching the progress bar creep.

Outside of the diagnostics, many technicians carry common spare parts such as:

> Wireless router
> CD-RW Drive
> Standard ATX Power Supply 300-500W
> Internal hard drives (40GB, 80GB, 120GB)
> Surge protector
> Speakers

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