THE MOBILE CRASH KIT

The essential gadget repair toolkit for the ultimate road warrior

BY CHRISTOPHER NULL

Computers and gadgets — they get broken. Sometimes it's even accidental. The next time your gear gets busted, take a crack at fixing it yourself.

Here's what's in the "crash kit" we've cobbled together to use in case of a gadget emergency or a sudden urge to upgrade.

CANNED AIR Believe it or not, dust can get inside your notebook, too. Get it out thusly.

BASIC TOOL KIT You can pick up a small set of screwdrivers and pliers for $20 or so. You might also want a soldering iron for those gadget-hacking projects.

WI-FI FINDER The Canary Wireless Digital Hotspotter ($50; www.canary wireless.com) lets you quickly check for Wi-Fi coverage without cracking open a notebook.

MINI KEYBOARD The BenQ DeskSaver ($42; www.benq.us) is about the smallest we've ever come across.

CABLES APLENTY You can't have too many spare cables. We're including Ethernet (standard and crossover), RJ-11 phone wiring, USB, FireWire, VGA, and DVI cables — plus a smattering of adapters and extenders.

THE CASE A durable tackle box or toolbox is the centerpiece of a crash kit; you could also use a small suitcase or travel bag with lots of pockets. This Flambeau 400SST Tackle Station ($45; www.flambeau.com) is more stylish than most tackle boxes. It has about 18,000 compartments for our various gadgets and doohickeys, and it lets us fit all this gear in the absolute minimum amount of space. The built-in ruler for measuring fish is just a bonus.

WI-FI ROUTER/ETHERNET HUB This router (part of the $100 U.S. Robotics Wireless Network Starter Kit; www.usr.com) is reasonably compact, easy to set up, and includes a four-port Ethernet hub that can be used on its own if you don't need to test the wireless connection.

SPECIALTY BITS You wouldn't believe what manufacturers will do to try to keep you out of their systems. To bypass the Torx, Posidrive, Tri-wing, Y-bit, Tamperproof hex, and myriad other tiny, crazy screw heads you've never heard of, we use this 100-piece screwdriver-bit set from Astro Pneumatic ($16; available at Amazon.com). You're on your own for the screwdriver.

SPARE CMOS BATTERY Why won't your notebook keep accurate time? Probably because the CMOS battery died. These are often custom parts from notebook vendors, but some machines use the old CR2032 standard (about $3). Keep one or two handy.

FLOPPY DRIVE/FLASH MEDIA READER Yes, Virginia, they do still put software on a floppy (mainly drivers). But this Iomega Floppy Plus USB drive ($52; www.iomega.com) does double duty by incorporating a multicard flash media reader into the device.

MODEM/ETHERNET PC CARD The quick way to fix a busted modem or Ethernet port is to use a PC Card fix like this old Xircom RealPort. Don't buy a new one (Xircom is part of Intel now) — you can get them used for $20 or less.

THUMBDRIVE Toss a few small flash-memory USB drives into your kit to make file transfers a breeze.

HARD-DISK ADAPTER An alternate method for connecting a notebook drive to a desktop PC comes via this handy 3.5-inch to 5.25-inch IDE adapter.

USB HUB The ultrasmall Tripp Lite U202 ($74; www.tripplite .com) provides a quick and easy way to extend the number of USB ports on older machines.

HARD DRIVES We've got a sampling of notebook-size drives for replacing faulty units. Invaluable is this IOGear Ion 2.5-inch drive enclosure ($55; www .iogear.com), which supports both USB 2.0 and FireWire connections.

PORTABLE DVD BURNER The centerpiece of our crash kit is this LaCie Double Layer DVD±RW ($199; www.lacie.com), which can read or burn just about any type of media you throw at it.

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RAM Keep plenty of spare sticks around. (Our favorite brands include Crucial, Kingston, and OCZ.) PC2700 DDR is the current standard in 200-pin SODIMM sticks. If you know you'll be working on a very old notebook, check the RAM type beforehand to ensure you have compatible sticks at the ready.

UNIVERSAL AC ADAPTER Use an adapter like the Belkin 120V AC/DC Power Adapter ($150; www.belkin.com) to guard against fried or missing power bricks.

SOFTWARE Keep all your discs (and blanks) in a durable case. (See page 60 for details of our software selections.)

TIP Write your software serial numbers directly on the CD-ROM — you'll never lose them!

FLASH MEMORY Keep a smattering of memory cards in every format you can wrangle up.

PS/2 ADAPTERS For working on extremely old equipment without a USB port, PS/2 adapters are always handy.

DVI/VGA ADAPTER You never know what kind of external monitor you're going to run into. Make sure you tote a DVI-to-VGA converter.

EXTRA SCREWS Save all the screws from your old equipment. You never know when you'll need them.

MINI MOUSE This Targus Ultra Mini Optical Mouse ($20; www.targus.com) has a scroll wheel and two extra programmable buttons.

ESSENTIAL MOBILE SOFTWARE
Man cannot survive on hardware alone. Here's a sampling of the utilities and other software we take with us in the crash kit

MICROSOFT WINDOWS XP PROFESSIONAL
$270; www.microsoft.com
The solution that cures most software ills: Reformat the hard drive and reinstall XP fresh.

MICROSOFT OFFICE PROFESSIONAL
$390; www.microsoft.com
The obligatory companion piece to XP.

① EXECUTIVE SOFTWARE UNDELETE 5
$30; www.execsoft.com
The recycle bin can be a cruel mistress when she purges those treasures you suddenly realize you need after all. Undelete can get them back for you — plus recover old overwritten Microsoft Office files that the recycle bin never even saw.

SYMANTEC NORTON SYSTEMWORKS 2005 PREMIER
$100; www.symantec.com
Includes Norton AntiVirus (for those nasty infections), Ghost (for making duplicate copies of hard drives), and the famed Norton Utilities (for everything else that's fouling up your system).

LAPLINK GOLD 12
$130; www.laplink.com
Snag files off of a machine sitting next to you (via USB cable) or one situated halfway around the world. Also includes remote-control software for long-distance troubleshooting.

IOLO SYSTEM MECHANIC 5 PROFESSIONAL
$70; www.iolo.com
The flip side of SystemWorks, most prized for its registry cleaner and suite of security tools from Kaspersky Labs.
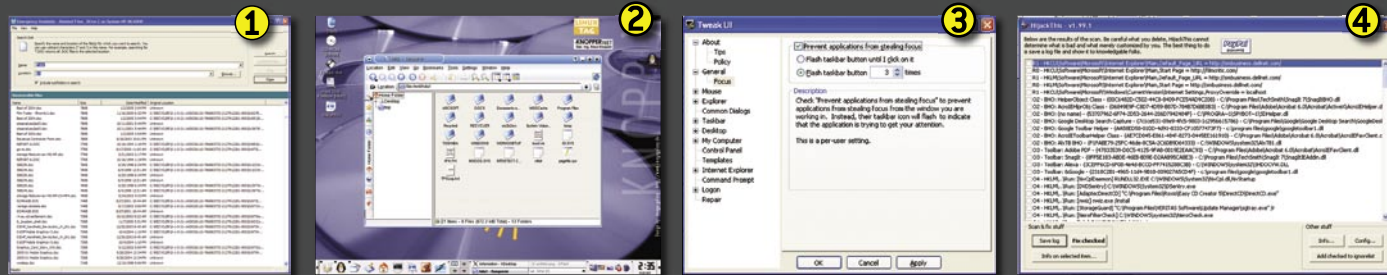
② KNOPPIX
Free; www.knoppix.org
Windows hosed? Create a Knoppix CD and you'll have a full-blown Linux operating system that can boot from disc. Most notebooks and peripherals are supported — and Knoppix will recognize your Windows hard drive to let you rescue any "lost" files.

BLANK MEDIA
Every format you can carry.

BURN IT YOURSELF
Each of these utilities can be downloaded from the web and burned to disc

③ MICROSOFT TWEAKUI
Free; tinyurl.com/2meyw
The famed "unsupported" utility makes XP behave a little more like the way you want it to.

MICROSOFT WINDOWS INSTALLER CLEANUP UTILITY
Free; tinyurl.com/47d8
You uninstalled, but the program still shows up in the Add or Remove Programs control panel? The Windows Installer CleanUp Utility does a good job at scrubbing away those stubborn remnants.

ACTIVE@ KILL DISK
$30; www.killdisk.com
Donating that old computer to charity? Use Kill Disk to scrub every last trace of personal data from the hard drive. Prepare to bid farewell to all those 1s and Os!

#1-PC DIAGNOSTICS TUFF TEST 1.53
$10; www.tufftest.com
Automatically runs 48 diagnostic tests

on your busted system — even one without a hard drive. And it doesn't destroy any data along the way. (The bad news: Running Tuff Test requires a bootable floppy drive.)

SPYBOT SEARCH & DESTROY 1.3
Free; www.safer-networking.org
Our standby antispyware utility, Spybot consistently does a thorough job at scrubbing crud off your system despite being developed and maintained by a single German dude.

④ HIJACKTHIS 1.99
Free; www.spywareinfo.com/~merijn
Some tough spyware apps can hijack your Internet Explorer home page and search results, and even the craftiest antispyware tools can't fix it. About half the time, HijackThis can do the job.

REMOTE RECOVER 2.0
Free demo; www.sysinternals.com
The demo version of this app hasn't been updated since 2002, but it's still a great way to access a "dead" computer

over your network to see if the drive is still operational. This version lets you read from the disk only. If you want the real deal, you'll have to pony up $1,199 (gulp) for the Winternals Administrator's Pak.

WINZIP 9.0
$29; www.winzip.com
Zip features are built in Windows XP, but any older OS will need this trusty standby.

DRIVERS AND BUNDLED APPS FOR ALL HARDWARE IN THE KIT
Just copy the CD-ROMs to folders on your custom CD — one folder for each device. We also include commonly needed files like the latest Nvidia and ATI video-driver packs.

TEXT FILE OF LICENSE KEYS, PASSWORDS, WEP CODES, AND SERIAL NUMBERS
You've come all this way — don't forget the serial number!