

Age-Friendly Computing

by Mark Howells

Try as America's baby boomers might to avoid the inevitable, they are slowly experiencing some loss of hearing, vision, and dexterity. As this demographic bulge passes into its golden years, smart marketers are responding to this consumer tsunami's changing wants and needs. From easy-grip tools to night vision options in automobiles, our consumer culture is busy catering to the changing needs of baby boomers.

The computer industry is no exception. Both Microsoft and IBM have recently launched what they call "accessibility" initiatives. Accessibility is those features of computer hardware and software that improve computer usage for people with disabilities. And while baby boomers would hardly consider what they are experiencing as disabilities, the letters on the screen do seem a bit small some days. And what about that twinge of pain when the left fingers stretch for the CTRL+ALT+Tab three-key combination?

Given that computer hardware and software can be adjusted to accommodate more severe disabilities, it is natural that vendors should want to use the same solutions to help baby boomers overcome their minor age-related computing challenges. This article is based largely on Microsoft's "Tips for the Awkward Age of Computing" found at www.microsoft.com/enable/aging/tips.aspx. Since Microsoft is far and away the largest supplier of operating system software with its current version of Windows XP, its tips for age-friendly



Courtesy of Brian Bassett and Microsoft Corporation

computing have the widest application among baby boomers.

While reviewing some of Microsoft's tips, keep in mind that similar methods of tweaking software to accommodate changes in vision, hearing, and hand coordination are available on non-Windows XP operating systems as well. Non-Windows users should be able to translate these ideas to fit their own operating systems.

Following are just a few Windows-based tips that are most relevant to our baby-booming genealogists.



Doctor, My Eyes Have Seen Better Days

Have you visited any genealogy websites lately where the text seems micro-engraved on the screen? By using your browser software, you can

control the size of the text you see on a web page.

In Internet Explorer, select View, then Text Size and select a text size for web pages that makes reading comfortable. You'll want to experiment with several different sizes to get the best combination of text size and screen real estate.

Web pages are just one of the many documents genealogists read from a computer screen. To make reading easier for all documents, try changing your screen resolution. While we all naturally assume that high resolution is better, in the case of a PC monitor, a lower resolution actually makes objects and text appear larger on the screen. To make everything on your screen look bigger, from the Start button, open Control Panel and select Display. Select the Settings tab and use the Screen Resolution sliding bar to lower your resolution. Adjust the resolution to make your most frequently read documents (such as e-mail) easy to read.

With an increase in the number of scanned documents available online for genealogical research, family historians

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are also challenged with deciphering old handwriting on computer screens rather than on paper or microfilm. The Magnifier utility in the Windows XP operating system is ideal for zooming in on hard-to-read portions of scanned documents, digitized family photos, or any other digital image.

The Magnifier splits your screen into normal view and magnified view; the magnified view tracks wherever you place your cursor. From Start, select All Programs, then Accessories, then select Accessibility, and finally select Magnifier. You can then select the magnification level you find most easy to read. This is a convenient alternative to changing your entire screen resolution since you can engage the Magnifier utility only when you need it. Magnifier will also provide inverted colors for the magnified view, which provides a “negative image” to better decipher those hard-to-read scratchings of our ancestors’ ink pens.

Pay Attention!

Have you ever had so many text documents open on your screen at one time that you can’t find your cursor within a document? Sometimes text cursors seem to go to the place where the missing half of a pair of socks is hiding.

To keep tabs on your text cursor, you can adjust your cursor’s width and blink rate. From Start, select Control Panel, then Accessibility Options, now select the Display tab and change the sliding bars for blink rate and width under Cursor Options. A slightly wider, more rapidly blinking text cursor may be all it takes for you to be able to find that little blinking rascal with ease.

Chasing down ancestors with your personal computer can be an all-consuming activity. Sometimes you may be so busy entering critical source citations into your database that you don’t notice when your PC is notifying you about something else. Recognizing the sounds that a PC generates to tell you “you’ve got mail” or that your cousin Gilbert sent you an instant message can be a problem. The volume knob only goes up so far. To make system events grab your attention, the Windows XP SoundSentry utility provides visual signal on the screen rather than a sound signal that might be too quiet to notice.

From Start, select Control Panel, then Accessibility Options, now select the Sound tab and next SoundSentry. This utility can be made to flash your entire screen, the window that is active, or the caption bar of the window that is active when a system sound occurs.

Hand Jive

Many baby boomers’ hands don’t stretch quite as easily as they used to, so holding down multiple keys at once can be challenging. The StickyKeys utility in Windows XP allows you to press one key at a time to get the desired function rather than holding several keys down simultaneously. With StickyKeys, a CTRL+ALT+Tab no longer requires a dislocated knuckle. From Start, select Control Panel, now select Accessibility Options, next the Keyboard tab, and finally StickyKeys. Settings for StickyKeys allow your PC to display when StickyKeys is activated so that you may type accordingly.

Beyond not being able to hold all the required keys done at once, there is also the problem of holding keys down tooooooooooooooooooooooo long. The Windows XP FilterKeys utility can help prevent this typo-generating problem. From Start, select Control Panel, then Accessibility Options,



Courtesy of Brian Basset and Microsoft Corporation

now the Keyboard tab, and finally select FilterKeys. Keys depressed and held an overly long time will then be ignored rather than repeated.

There are more tricks and tips for making an aging baby boomer's computing life easier, including large icons, speech recognition, and high color contrasts. More Windows XP specific ideas can be found at the Awkward Age article at <www.microsoft.com/enable/aging/tips.aspx>.

Boomerang

As the baby boomers begin their autumn years, genealogy is getting a big boost in interest. Nothing focuses the mind on the big questions like "Where did I come from?" or "Who were my ancestors?" better than the first glimpses of mortality. The demographic juggernaut that popularized the hula-hoop is likewise making genealogy more popular. Most of the boomers had to adapt to the introduction of personal computers in the workplace. Personal computers have since moved from the workplace to the home and are making excellent tools to support genealogical research. Now those same personal computers are adapting to the baby boomers' newly discovered physical limitations. Used to getting their demographic way, boomers will not tolerate pain or other difficulty in using their PCs. They will undoubtedly fix their tools to get their research done. ☞

Mark Howells forgets to take the caps lock off at markhow@oz.net.

Links for Further Squinting

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Fee: \$15 per name per county or city (\$35 if city of over 30,000 in population) includes photocopy of card if found.

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ALL ports available, from the 1600s to the mid-1900s, varying by port. Beginning in the late 1800s, lists give such information as last town of residence, town of birth, name, addresses of relative or contact in homeland, and of contact in United States, if/when in United States before, physical description, occupation, traveling companions, amount of money carried, etc. OUR INDEXES LIST MANY PASSENGERS MISSED BY THE NEW ELLIS ISLAND INDEX!

Fee: \$39 (\$20 refunded if not found in index) per person per port (or, if port unknown a 3-port search, such as New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore is \$65 (\$20 refunded if not in indexes). Price includes a copy of the complete manifest entry if found. Ship histories and pictures also available.

CITY DIRECTORIES SEARCHES

An excellent source of information, giving address, occupation/employer, and often wife's or deceased husband's name. Track you ancestor's first/last appearance and changes of address and employment. Some records even give the name of the town to which they moved, or an exact birth date. Most cities and large towns are available from the 1700s to the present, plus London England.

Fee: \$25 for any 6 searches (1 search=1 surname/1town/1year); additional searches are \$3.75 each. Most years available of those published. Closest years to those available will be searched.

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