

HOME IT SERVICES CANNOT COMPUTE? MAYBE YOU SHOULD HARNESS GEEK POWER TO FIX YOUR MACHINE, SAYS **FIONA MACDONALD**

Pit stops for your laptop

There's an unfeasibly fresh-faced man at my door, complete with pristine white shirt and missionary zeal. I can't help thinking of Jehovah's Witnesses. But he's not here to convert me. Instead, he's on another mission altogether: to heal my afflicted electronics.

Dean Levy – or 'Double Agent Dean Levy', as he likes to be known – is part of the Geek Squad's crack team. One of the first to provide technical support in the living room as well as the office (although it's becoming a crowded market – see the box below for other services on offer), the Geek Squad (pictured right) launched its British branch last year, owned 50-50 by US company Best Buy and the Carphone Warehouse.

Yet, refreshingly, its agents aren't out to push products; they aim to offer customer service a generation

away from the mumbling teens in high street stores. Dean's on a home visit to fix my ailing, three-year-old Dell laptop, which seems to be grinding to a halt.

One look at the available disk space and he gasps in horror. 'You've only got 10MB left,' he says. 'That's about the size of an MP3 file.' I sit down next to him. This may take some time. Dean shows me the processes as he does them, explaining how I can stop this from happening again.

We start with the temporary internet files – web page content that's been stored on my hard disk for quick viewing (allowing the

browser to download content that's changed since I last visited, rather than all the content on each visit). Except that, since websites are updated so frequently, temp files are largely redundant and I've never cleared them out. Just by removing the files, we clear half a gigabyte of space.

Ramming it home

Meanwhile, Dean's spotted a problem with the Random Access Memory (RAM). It's what allows users to run multiple programs at the same time, and mine's so sluggish it seems hungover. Dean points out there are 75 programs running on start-up; ideally, that should be between 30 and 35.

He points to an AOL program. I don't remember ever using AOL. 'Ah, that'll be the bloatware,' he sighs. The what? 'The applications manufacturers include on the computer when they sell it, in return for money from the software companies.' Apparently, AOL's been running on my laptop for the past three years for absolutely no reason.

It's the first to go when we purge the programs. But before that comes the desktop clean-up. Not the most tidy person when it comes to paperwork, I've managed to sprinkle my desktop with plenty of icon clutter. In sorting it

out, Dean comes across folders with pictures I forgot to save on my external hard drive. There are also installation files for applications that have already been installed. Another 4GB gone – there's now 4.84GB free.

At this point, Dean runs his system analyser program, which finds any viruses, scans for security fixes and tells you if you need to 'defragment'. We also start the program purge. Dean goes into the 'start-up configuration utility' and disables more than 20 of the start-up programs – before he notices my McAfee is out of date. Just by replacing it with free anti-virus software, he reduces the number of programs running at start-up from 75 to 35.

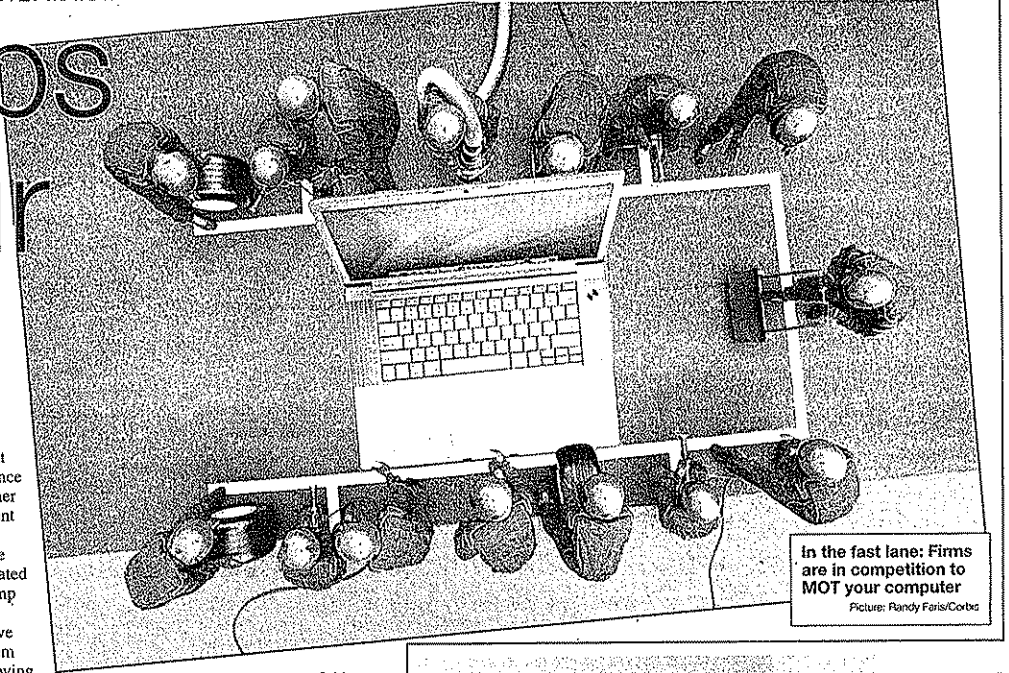
Fragging for the memory

By now Dean has freed up 6.22GB of space – enough to defragment. The process (which requires at least five per cent free space to run) puts files in order. New data is stored in whatever space is available so files are spread across the disk as they're updated and can be broken into thousands of fragments. 'Defragging' reduces wear and tear on the drive mechanism and makes disks easier to restore if they crash.

After writing his 'field agent communiqué' including mission details and debriefing (he even explains how I can double the RAM with some cheap hardware), Dean hands over control of the laptop and with a flash of his Geek Squad badge, he's gone.

I run a test drive and manage to go from boot-up to web surfing in less than a minute. Without a whiff of a bible, I've been converted.

Home visits in London, the South and the North-West start from £99. MyGeek, a remote support service (via the internet) is available from £10 per month. Tel: 0800 049 6190, www.geeksquad.co.uk



In the fast lane: Firms are in competition to MOT your computer




Picture: Randy Farris/Corbis



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