Eliminating Repetitive Task Annoyances

SOME PEOPLE HAVE A LOW TOLER-ANCE FOR REPETITIVE TASKS. MAYBE YOU'RE ONE OF THEM.

Doing something once is fine. Twice is OK. Three times and the task will begin to annoy some. That's about where my level of annoyance kicks in and I start looking for a way to have the computer do the work with minimal input from me.

Computers are extremely good at doing the same thing over and over. They don't get bored. Think of a computer as a fast and extremely accurate idiot. Tell the computer what you want it to do and it will perform that task exactly the same way time after time. Within reason.
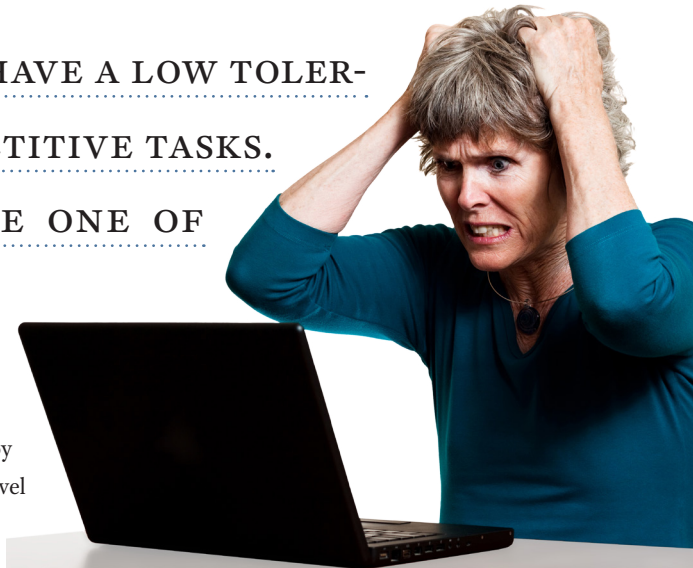
There are now even automated devices that can mow the lawn or vacuum floors, but I'll stick to describing tasks that a desktop or notebook computer can be trained to do.

Depending on what you want to automate, I recommend using one of three programs that are available. All three perform many of the same functions, but each has its own approach and each has strengths that will appeal to different types of users.

Three Useful Programs

THE PROGRAMS I RECOMMEND ARE MACRO EXPRESS, AUTOHOTKEY, AND AUTOIT.

Macro Express uses a fill-in-the-blanks approach, AutoIt comes with a specialized editor, and AutoHotKey works with any text editor. AutoIt's code looks a lot like Visual Basic, while AutoHotKey looks a bit like a cross between Perl and Javascript. Macro Express doesn't let the user see the code because it displays easy-to-read explanations of what each step will do in its own proprietary editor.

AutoIt and AutoHotKey are closely related and both are free.

AutoHotKey is the most basic of the three programs and it's the perfect choice if you're looking for a way to convert a few keystrokes into many words or paragraphs. These are called *keyboard replacements* because the program monitors what you're typing and when it sees a special abbreviation, AutoHotKey steps in, deletes the abbreviation, and types the replacement text.

For example, you might set it up so that when you type "tnxfollow", AutoHotKey will replace that word with "Thanks for your inquiry about our product ...," and then continue for several paragraphs that explain the advantages of your product or service.

Definitions are created in a plain text file. Each abbreviation begins on a new line with ::abbreviation:: and this is followed by any amount of text, but with a bit of a catch. A carriage return marks

Should You Have a Podcast?

My alter ego has written and produced a podcast called *TechByter Worldwide* for nearly a decade and, although I don't use it to promote William Blinn Communications, there's probably some crossover effect. If your business needs to communicate with more clients and prospects, maybe you should consider a podcast.

The weekly *Techbyter Worldwide* podcast is the equivalent of an hour-long radio broadcast, meaning about 22 minutes. A radio hour is really about 22 minutes once the news, weather, sports, commercials, jingles, and incidental music (called "bumpers") have been eliminated.

How Long?

Podcasts can be any length, but they cannot be commercials. How many people would download and listen to a podcast in which I said repeatedly how great I am? Lots of people do download and listen to *TechByter Worldwide* because I provide useful information.

Content Is King

That's the key to a successful podcast whether it's 60 seconds or 60 minutes. If you're selling widgets, talk about how the user can use the widgets to do something they want to do. Remember the old advertising adage: *People don't buy quarter-inch drill bits; they buy quarter-inch holes.*

Being a broadcast guy, I'd always considered podcasts to be inferior to the "real thing", but 10 years of producing a podcast has convinced me otherwise. Podcasting has advantages for listeners and for content providers. I can create the program when it's convenient for me and listeners can listen at a time they choose.

Will It Work for You? Ω

The Macro Express programming language includes dozens of commands, each with variations and conditions, so that the program can automate nearly anything that the computer can do.

the end of a replacement sequence, so including a carriage return to create a paragraph break requires the use of *escape characters*. AutoHotKey uses the backtick character (`` ` ``), which is on the same key as the tilde (~), to mark one of these special characters. Creating replacement text that would place the words "One", "Two", and "Three" on three consecutive lines would be written as "One`rTwo`rThree" because `r serves to indicate a carriage return.

The easy-to-use AutoHotKey is based on a previous version of AutoIt, a much more complex application. It is the better tool for those who need to work directly with the operating system because it provides functions that can directly address Windows settings.

AutoIt's programming language looks more like Visual Basic, which allows it to claim the status of a "general-purpose, third-generation programming language". AutoIt scripts can be converted into stand-alone executable files so that the macro can be run on computers where AutoIt is not installed.
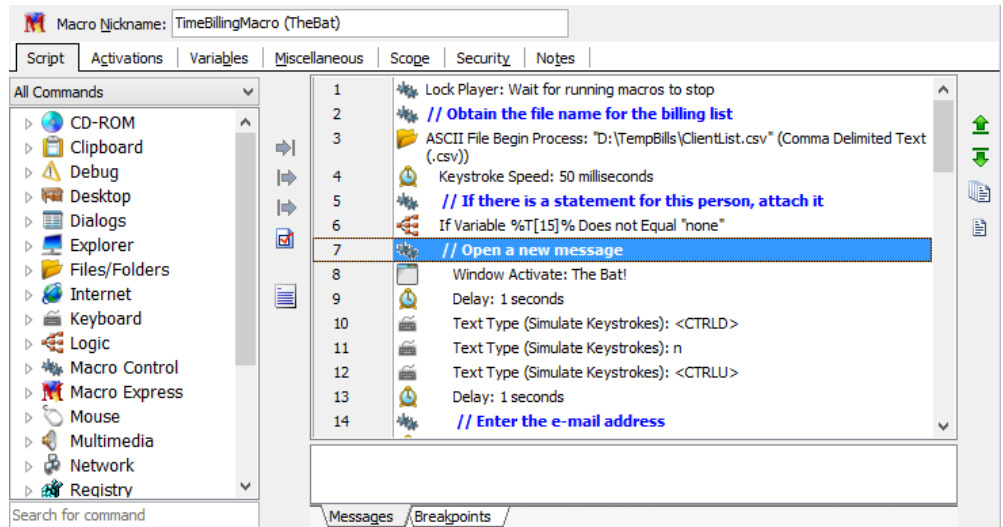
Although users can create and edit scripts in any text editor, AutoIt includes an integrated development environment based on the free SciTE editor.

MacroExpress is Comprehensive

MacroExpress is part of a family of automation products. It uses a proprietary language that includes support for variables, if-then-else logic, loops, and other functions such as controlling the size and shape of program windows, interacting with the interface, and the ability to start a macro when some external event occurs.

Unlike AutoHotKey and AutoIt, Macro Express includes the ability to record a user's actions, both key strokes and mouse clicks. Recorded processes often need significant editing before they can be used, though.

Because all of these programs monitor the keyboard, protective applications may mistake them for malware. If your antivirus program won't allow you to install MacroExpress, AutoIt,

This is a sample MacroExpress macro. Each individual step in the process occupies a line. Symbols on the left side of the line indicate the type of operation performed by the line. Editing each line's function is activated by double-clicking the line.

or AutoHotKey (and you're certain that you've downloaded the program from the developer's site) you can disable the protective application until you have installed the macro program.

Macro Express is available in 2 versions: Macro Express for $40 and Macro Express Pro, with additional features, for $60. The company also offers ShortKeys ($25) and Keyboard Express ($30). KeyboardExpress is more like AutoHotKey and MacroExpressPro is more like AutoIt.

The Macro Express programming language includes dozens of commands, each with variations and conditions, so that the program can automate nearly anything that the computer can do.

For example, you may have invoice files that need to be e-mailed to clients each month. A Macro Express function could read in a list of client names, e-mail addresses, and file names; open the e-mail program; create a new message, fill in some text, and attach the invoice file; write the subject line; and then place the finished message in the outbox.

Speed and Accuracy

Macros save time because they type faster than people can type and reduce errors because they won't make any spelling errors unless you created those errors when you set up the macro.

One warning, though: None of the applications can run in the background. Each must have full control of the computer when a macro is running. Clicking the mouse or typing on the keyboard while a macro is running will cause problems. This also applies to any other program that pops up and grabs focus. For short macros, ones that run only a few seconds, this isn't a problem, but it might be if you have a macro that runs for several minutes.

Although both AutoIt and AutoHotKey are free and provide reliable functionality, my preference is Macro Express, in part because its user interface makes the system easy to understand. Users can also break tasks up into multiple small macros instead of writing one huge macro. This often speeds the process because each small component can be tested and debugged before being combined with others.

If you have jobs that you have to do over and over, take a look at one of these automation applications: www.macroexpress.com, www.autoitscript.com, or www.autohotkey.com. Ω