

How To

Manage the XP Desktop

by
Ron Brubaker

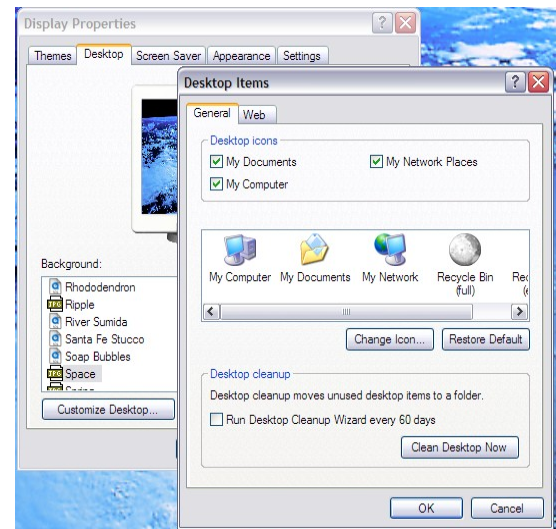
Shortcut icons on your desktop provide a handy way to start programs. You need to know how to add shortcut icons for the programs you use a lot, delete shortcut icons for programs you don't use, and move shortcut icons to the proper place on your screen. There are several additional places where you may wish to move your shortcut icons. This article will cover how to add them to the desktop, to the Quick Launch portion of the task bar, and to the Start Menu.

Shortcuts vs Icons

Icons on your screen can represent either application programs or folders. Most of the icons on your screen are technically termed "shortcuts." All shortcuts have a small arrow near the lower left corner. These are tiny bits of code that show Windows where to find the corresponding executable file or folder. Below I will be discussing how to add, move, and delete shortcuts but let's consider the exceptions here.



First there are a small number of system icons. If you right click an unoccupied area of the desktop you will see a menu. Select Properties from this menu and the Display Properties dialog will appear. Near the bottom on the left you will see a button labeled Customize Desktop. Click this to bring up the Desktop Items dialog. At the top of this dialog you will find My Documents, My Computer, and My Network Places. These will appear on your desktop if the checkboxes in front of the names are checked. This is the correct way to add or delete these icons from the desktop. Once they are on the desktop they can be moved as described below, but they should not be moved off the main desktop.

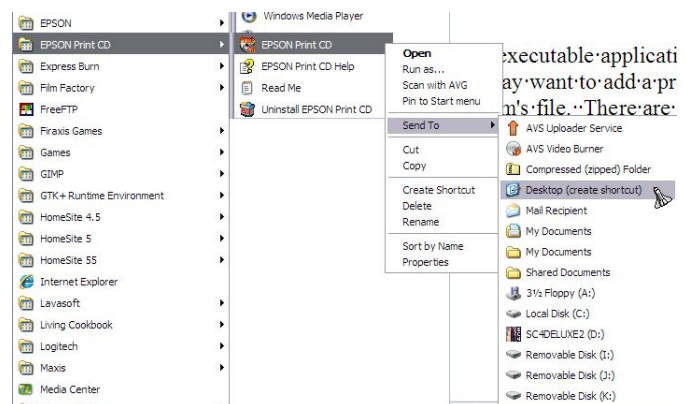


You should note that one of these system icons is actually a folder. It acts like a shortcut to the My Documents directory. You can add folders of your own to the desktop. These will act as shortcuts to frequently used directories. I prefer to minimize adding icons to the desktop but I'm sure a lot of you do not. I use folders as a means of grouping a number of programs under a single icon. For example, my most frequently accessed club information is in one file folder, games are in another, and at the moment the utilities for working with sounds are grouped in a third folder.

Adding Shortcuts to the Desktop

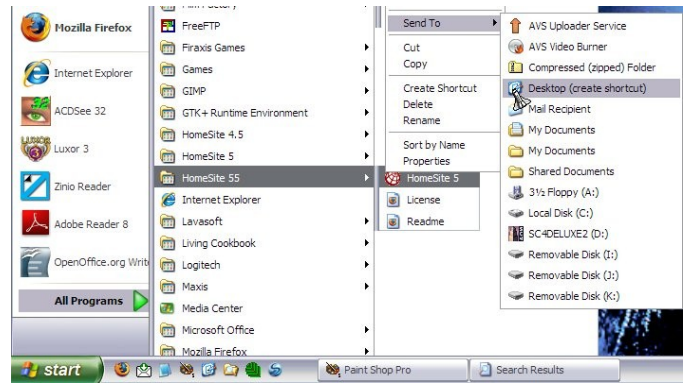
All Windows programs have an icon associated with the executable application program. Most install a copy of this item to the desktop to provide a shortcut to starting the application, but there are occasions when you may want to add a program's icon to the desktop.

The only hard part of this task is to find the executable program's file. There are several possibilities. If you don't know the exact name of the executable file try Start|All Programs and look for the program or its directory (group) in the list that appears. The list contains both program names and group names. Programs are preceded by the program's icon but all group names will use the same icon.

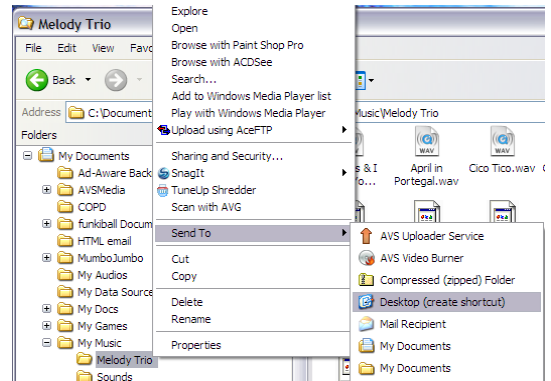


If the program name is in the list select it by moving the cursor to this item and right clicking on it. Move the cursor to Send To in the list that appears and another list will appear. Click on Desktop (create shortcut) and the new shortcut will appear on the desktop.

If the list shows a group icon the members of the group will appear when your cursor is over the group name. Move the cursor to the list and right click the program's name, it will be preceded by the program's icon. Another menu will appear with a list of things you can do with the file you have selected. Move the cursor to Send To and yet another list will appear. Move to Desktop (create shortcut) and click on this option. The new shortcut will appear on the desktop.



Adding a folder to the desktop is also quite easy. Using Windows Explorer select the folder for which you wish to have a shortcut. Right-click on the folder and choose Send To and then choose Move to Desktop (create shortcut). In the example I chose to make a shortcut icon for the folder Melody Trio.

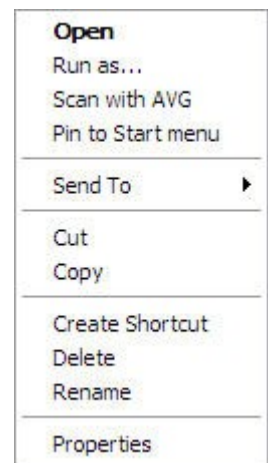


You can create a new folder on your desktop by right-clicking on an unoccupied area of the desktop and choosing New\Folder from the menus that appear. If you do this you need to be aware that this folder is NOT A SHORTCUT. Files that you put in this folder will actually reside in this folder on the desktop. If you delete the folder from the desktop you will be deleting the actual folder and all of its contents from your system. I only use desktop folders to hold a group of shortcuts. If the folder gets deleted all I lose is a few icons.

Deleting a Shortcut



Deleting a shortcut is very simple. Right-click on the icon to bring up its right-click menu. Click on Delete. This will cause a dialog to appear which is not the usual warning that you are about to delete something. Note that it makes it clear that you are only deleting a shortcut. It also tells you how to remove the program from your computer the correct way using Control Panel's Add or Remove Programs.

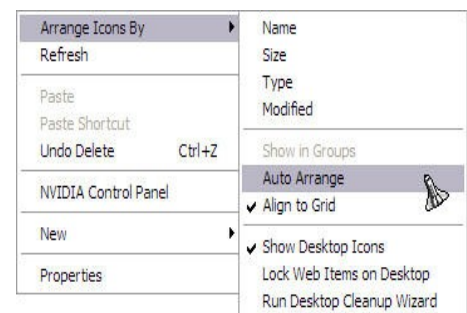


It is possible to select multiple icons by holding down the delete key and left-clicking on each icon. With the cursor over any one of the items either tap the delete key or right-click and select delete from the menu that appears.

Moving Shortcuts

Icons can be moved around on the desktop. First check to be sure that this has not be precluded by one of your system's settings. Right click on an unoccupied area of the desktop. The left pane of the menu below will appear. Click on Arrange Icons By and the right pane will be added. Check to be sure that Auto Arrange is not checked. If it is checked you cannot rearrange the icons. I suggest that Align to Grid should be checked because if it isn't every time you click on an icon it will tend to move a bit. Before long all the icons are far enough from being aligned in rows and columns that it will look like you stood back and threw them at the screen.

I find it handy to group the shortcuts on my desktop according to how I use them rather than in alphabetic order or some other arbitrary scheme.



Everyone has their own style but it is customary to place icons starting in the upper left-hand corner of the desktop. Remember that the objective is not to fill the screen. I try to have the minimum number of icons on my screen because I have found some much better places for them to be. The question is how often do I use a program. If it is once in a blue moon then I don't mind having to search through the list of all of the

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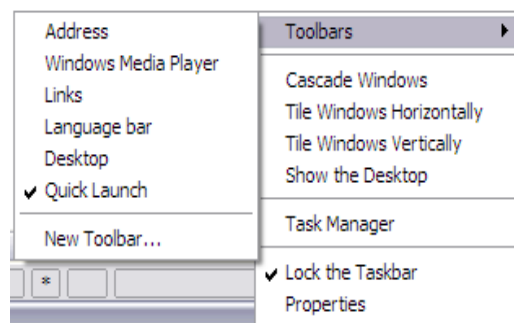
programs on my system to find it, especially now that I have that list alphabetized. I discussed this process in the last newsletter.

Renaming Shortcuts

Sometimes I pine for the old days when all file names were limited to eight letters plus a three character extension. All executable program files had the same three letter extension (.exe) so authors were forced to use the first eight characters very judiciously. Currently application names are somewhere between sentences and paragraphs, or at least it begins to look that way if the full names appear below their shortcut icon. My suggestion is to trim those pesky names back to something reasonable. For example Microsoft Word 2003 becomes Word, Adobe Photoshop Elements 5.0 becomes PSE5, etc. If you right click on a shortcut icon a menu will appear that includes the option to rename the icon. Note that initially the whole name will be selected so if you lead off with the delete key the whole thing disappears. I start out with the right arrow key to move the cursor to the right end of the name. Then I can move around with the arrow keys or the mouse deleting characters and/or adding them to get what I want. Try it, you'll like it.

Alternative Locations for Shortcuts

Applications that I use very frequently, particularly ones I may wish to use while I am working on another application, need to be accessible at all times. There is a special portion of the toolbar at the bottom of the Windows desktop that provides this very useful service. It is called the Quick Launch Bar. It is located just the the right of the Start button. To activate it, if it is not currently in use, right click on an unoccupied stretch of the taskbar at the bottom of the screen. The right pane of the figure below will appear. If you select Toolbars from the menu then the left pane will appear. To enable Quick Launch make sure that this item is checked.



To add shortcuts to the Quick Launch simply drag the on screen icon down toward the bottom of the screen. When it gets into the Quick Launch area a black bar will appear that indicates where the shortcut will go when you release the mouse button. If necessary you can click on a shortcut in the Quick Launch area and drag it right or left over the other icons until you have it where you want it.

Since the Quick Launch bar expands out into the space that is used to show what applications are active on your computer it should be used sparingly. This is prime real estate and should not be squandered for trivial applications you hardly ever use.

Speaking of expansion, you need to know how to move the right boundary of the quick launch bar to make it big enough. Start by right clicking an empty part of the taskbar at the bottom of the screen. Uncheck the Lock the Taskbar item temporarily. You should now see a faint pattern that looks like a double row of boxes somewhere to the right of the Quick Launch bar. Use your mouse to drag this either to the right or to the left to resize the Quick Launch. Don't forget to relock the Taskbar.

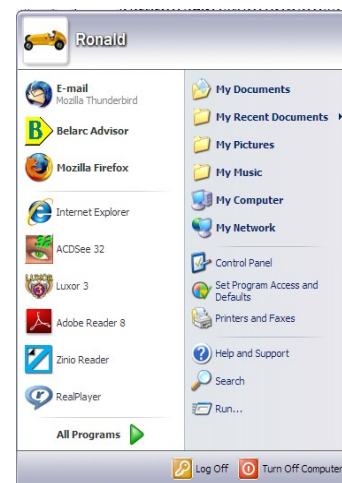
The Start Menu

A second more out of the way place to place shortcuts is in the Start Menu. The Start Menu consists of a number of areas but we are primarily concerned with the left side. We have control over the content of the upper section of the left side. The lower portion will show the icons for a number of the programs that we have used most recently.

The capacity of the Start Menu is rather limited but it is a good place to hide a few shortcuts for programs that we plan to use fairly frequently. The Start button is always accessible but requires an extra mouse click to open the menu and then a click to select the program.

Adding shortcuts to the Start Menu is very easy. Just drag a shortcut from the desktop onto the Start button. The original desktop shortcut will still be there but you can delete it because it is redundant.

Removing unwanted shortcuts from this list requires a right click to bring up the menu and selection of the option to "Remove from This List".



Removing Shortcuts

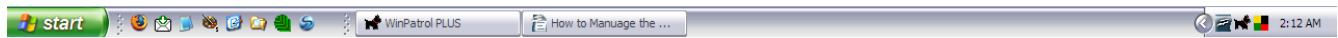
Shortcuts that you have placed in the Quick Launch bar or the Start Menu can be removed using the right-click menu. Right-click on the shortcut to bring up the appropriate menu. For Start List items it will include an item Remove from This List. For the Quick Launch shortcuts check that the shortcut you wish to remove is highlighted and click on Delete in the menu.

You can also drag shortcuts out of the Quick Launch area to the desktop. Note that the shortcut disappears from the Quick Launch and appears on the desktop. If you drag it the other way you will find you have two shortcuts.

Searching the All Programs List

Remember, you can access programs that are not on the desktop by clicking the Start button and then clicking on "All Programs" to bring up a list of all the programs installed on your system. I used to hate resorting to that until I learned that I could alphabetize this list by selecting the item I wished to move, pressing and holding the left mouse button while dragging the item to where I wanted it to appear and releasing the mouse button. Now that the list is in order it is much easier to find things. It may be useful to ignore the software house's name and list the applications in order by the actual program name.

The Rest of the Taskbar



As long as we have examined the Start Button and the Quick Launch Bar why not finish the Taskbar. The next stretch of the taskbar is where you will find buttons representing the applications that you have running. Initially these are pretty wide buttons but if you get enough of them going they can get pretty narrow and the names can become unreadable. First, realize that all of these applications are using memory so unless you have a ton of RAM use a bit of discretion. If you must, unlock the taskbar (see above) and then position the cursor on the top edge of it so that it turns into a double headed arrow. Once the double headed arrow appears press and hold down the left button and carefully slide the mouse up slowly to cause the taskbar to become two rows high. While this uses up a bit more screen it allows a lot more room for Quick Start shortcuts, more applications and still leaves room for the tray on the right end. Don't forget to relock the taskbar when you are done.

At the right end of the taskbar you will find the tray. Frankly I wish I had more control over the icons that appear there. These icons represent applications that are running or at least a part of the application is actively running. Lately every software vendor wants to have part of their application running so that it doesn't take so long to get the rest of it up and running. The problem is, they are using up RAM for stuff we may or may not need. I have managed to pare down what is running in this area but it has required a lengthy process and more techniques than I can go into here. Perhaps that can be the subject of a later article. For now let us say that it is fortunate that XP will hide all but a few of these icons. They're still out there running but at least I don't have to look at them and feel guilty for not getting rid of a few more. Click on the arrowhead at the left end of the tray to expand the view so you can see everything that is in the tray.

A Special Shortcut

There is one special shortcut that will appear in the Quick Launch area when you first enable it. This icon is valuable so don't delete it. Imagine that you have a whole bunch of applications running and you really want to start another one that is not in your quick launch list or in the start button list. It is a nuisance to close all those windows to get back to the desktop so the good folks and Microsoft gave you this icon. Click on it and everything that was occupying your desktop is minimized. Open your new application and then click on the buttons corresponding to the minimized applications one at a time as you need them. I have been amazed at how many times I have used this since I learned about it. Enjoy.

