

What does 'delete' mean?

Many users are still convinced that when they delete a document or file on their computer, it vanishes into thin air -- but that's hardly the case.

As "Sam," a security engineer who wishes to remain anonymous because of the nature of his job, explains: "When a user 'deletes' a file, it's not really gone. Deleted files are sent to the Trash folder. At this point, files can still be recovered." However, even if the Trash folder is emptied, it doesn't mean the file has disappeared completely. "But the longer a deleted file is left on a drive, the greater the chance the file cannot be recovered," Sam says.

Everyday PC maintenance

There are a number of programs out there that help ensure that your deleted files are really deleted. In addition to guarding your privacy by removing traces of your Internet browsing history and files and programs you have used, some also cleans registries, removes clutter by clearing out temporary files, and helps solve the problem of a fragmented hard drive by rearranging data so it can be accessed more quickly. Some of these can also 'undelete' files.

Formatting and disk wipe

Then there are times when you really do need to permanently delete everything. If you are in the process of donating or selling your computer, or if you have sensitive information stored on it which you wish to be deleted permanently (such as medical information, bank or legal documents, or Social Security numbers), tech experts recommend reformatting your hard drive or performing a disk wipe. According to The Tech FAQ, "Formatting the hard drive or any of its partitions will completely erase all data that is present."

A thorough "disk wipe" will essentially overwrite your hard drive to the point where recovery is impossible. As "Sam" explains, "When the U.S. Government wants to delete information from an entire hard drive, it employs the Department of Defense disk wipe, which means the entire drive has its data overwritten with a random pattern of zeros and ones (binary data) three times. At this point, any data on the hard drive is considered unrecoverable. In some instances, the platters are removed from the hard drive and dipped in caustic acid -- referred to as 'erase by physical destruction.'"

Users can (and should) erase the hard drives of their old computers so their data cannot be found by anyone else (think Paul McCartney). One program "Sam" and other tech experts recommend is Darik's Boot and Nuke, which will delete the contents of a hard drive with certainty.

Consequences of not deleting files

Sensitive information carelessly stored on computers can lead to identity theft, and also harks the growing need for computer forensics.

In 2007, for example, a forensics expert found that the new publisher of the *Minneapolis*

Star Tribune had transferred sensitive information over from his *St. Paul Pioneer Press* computer, where he previously worked. In another case, the insurer Health Net was recently sued as a result of a missing computer hard drive that stored the medical records of several thousand customers.

A program I use to wipe a hard drive clean that I'm getting rid of is Window Washer.

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Cleans up system clutter
Reduces error messages

Increases speed and performance

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