
What is the Windows Registry? Why Do You Care?

Those of you that have a system utility - like Norton SystemWorks or Iolo's System Mechanic might see a message that states that you have errors in your Windows Registry. And many of us might wonder what the Registry is, what it does, and why it's so important to the efficient and stable operation of your computer. Here's the scoop.

The Windows Registry is the central database in Windows (9x, CE, NT, 2000, XP - for more "experienced" folks, The Registry replaced most of the old text-based .ini files used in Windows 3.x and MS-DOS i.e. Autoexec.bat, Config.sys, etc.) that stores all of the information your system needs to accommodate one or more users, all of your applications and the hardware devices (hard drives, ports, video cards, etc.) that it contains. The Registry database contains information that Windows is constantly referencing - user profiles, applications installed and the types of documents the application can create, properties of folders and application icons, available hardware and ports in use.

Users can modify the registry (however - Microsoft states that if you edit the registry incorrectly, it can cause problems that would force you to reinstall the operating system and Microsoft cannot guaranty that once the problem has been created that it can ever be resolved. Scary stuff!) using the Registry Editor (Regedit.exe or Reget32.exe) but recommends that edits be made using the Windows user interface when possible.

The registry editor provides access to a number of predefined keys on the system - for example HKEY_CURRENT_USER contains the root configuration for the user logged into the system. Folders, screen colors, and control panel settings are among the information stored here. Other keys include HKEY_USERS, HKEY_LOCAL-MACHINE, HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT, REG-BINARY, REG_DWORD, REG_EXPAN_XA, REG_MULTI_SZ, REG-SZ, REG_RESOURCE-LIST and more.

Bottom line - the Windows Registry is THE database that Windows uses to make your system operate. It can be manually edited by users, but it's a dangerous prospect if you aren't an expert. We suggest that now that you know how important the registry is, that invest in a system utility (like those outlined above) to make fixing any registry errors a sure thing - and not risk "cratering" your system.