

Tweaking the Windows XP Registry - Part 1



Several years ago, I offered a five-part series on how to use the Windows Registry, but a lot has changed since then, both in Windows and in CC-Mag readership. I thought it time, therefore, to take a look at this subject again. The Registry is in reality a database that is organized in a tree format (Fig. 1) and stores most of the configuration information for your computer in two files: SYSTEM.DAT and USER.DAT. In this series, we'll explain the sections the Registry contains, how to back it up in case

we mess something up during editing, and offer many ways to tweak your system by editing the Registry.

Starting Registry Editor

Registry Editor is a special editor that enables you to view and edit the Registry directly. It was installed into your Windows folder (directory) during Windows setup. To start it, click the "Start > Run," type **regedit**, and then press **Enter** (Fig. 1). (BTW, if you're on a network, you must be logged on as the administrator, or a member of the Administrator group on both your computer and the remote computer before you can make any changes to the remote computer. Network policy settings might also prevent editing.)

Understanding the Registry's Structure

Figure 1 shows Regedit's main sections. Note its two panes. The left pane ("Key" pane) shows the Registry structure, and the left pane ("Contents" pane) is for viewing and editing data contained within the Keys. Each section begins with the prefix HKEY (short for Handle to a Key) and is followed by a section name. Each "key" is actually a "folder" (directory). Notice the folder icon next to each section name. Like any other folder, each of these keys can have

"subkeys" (subfolders) and data values. To expand a section, click on the plus sign, just like you do in Windows Explorer. Figure 1 shows the HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE section expanded into its first level subkeys.

The HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT section is a subkey of HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\Software. The information stored here ensures that the correct program opens when you open a file.

The HKEY_CURRENT_USER is the section contains the root of the configuration information for the user who is currently logged on. The user's folders, screen colors, and Control Panel settings are stored here. This information is referred to as a "user's profile." All the examples of Registry editing in this series assume you are making changes only for the current

(default) user. If you want to make changes for other users, you must edit the appropriate locations in the HKEY_USERS section.

The HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE section contains configuration information particular to the computer (for any user). Stored here are application names, version numbers, application pathnames, hardware settings, and even the names of the companies that make the software you have installed. This information is used for all users who log on to this computer.

The HKEY_USERS section contains the root of all user profiles on the computer.

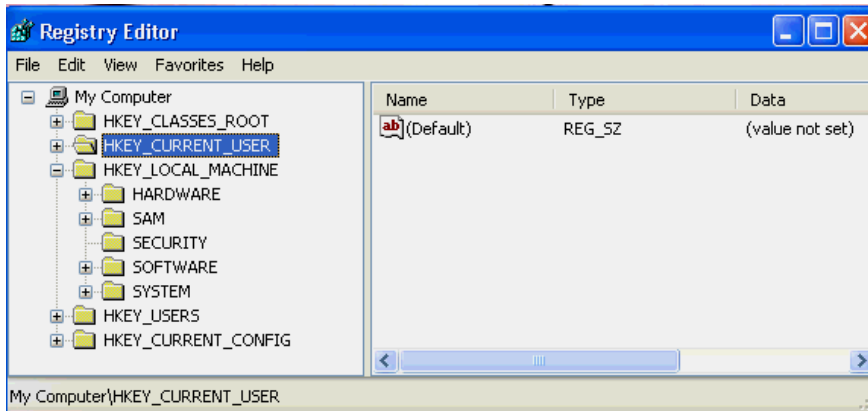


Fig 1 - The Registry's structure viewed in Registry Editor

HKEY_CURRENT_USER is a subkey of HKEY_USERS. The information is made up of default settings for applications, Desktop configurations, network connections, and the Start menu. This key contains subkeys for each user that logs on to this computer. The information in this branch is also stored in the USER.DAT file. If the computer is configured using user profiles, a separate USER.DAT file is created for each user. When a user logs on to the computer, Windows reads the appropriate USER.DAT file and incorporates it into the Registry.

The HKEY_CURRENT_CONFIG section contains information about the hardware profile used by the local computer at system startup.

Backing Up the Registry

Before editing the Registry, it is extremely important to back it up first. (Was that clear enough.) An error in the Registry could cause Windows not to start at all.

First, create a backup directory (e.g. C:\WINDOWS\REGBACK). *Second*, from the Windows folder, copy SYSTEM.DAT and USER.DAT to your backup directory. For extra security, you could zip SYSTEM.DAT and USER.DAT and store them on a floppy. *Third*, create a start-up floppy (just in case). In the format dialog box, select the "Create an MS-DOS startup

disk" option. Now if something goes amiss, you can either boot to DOS by pressing **F8** during the normal boot process or boot from drive A, change to the backup directory (C)>cd C:\WINDOWS\REGBACK, copy the files into the Windows directory (COPY *.DAT C:\WINDOWS), and then reboot normally.

Changing Registered User Information

For a simple Registry edit, I'll outline how to change the Registered User information in Windows. This is the name and organization you enter when you install Windows. You might want to do this, for example, if you

bought the computer from another user or if you change the name of the company. This information is displayed in the "Registered To" area in Control Panel's "System Properties" dialog box ("Start > Settings > Control Panel > System > General").

First, launch Regedit and navigate to "HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Microsoft\Windows NT [or Windows]\CurrentVersion." *Second*, click the "CurrentVersion" key in the left pane, and then look in the right pane for the values "RegisteredOrganization" and "RegisteredOwner" in the right pane.

Third, to change each value, double-click on it (or right-click and select "Modify"), type the new information on the "Value Data" line in the "Edit String" dialog box that appears, and then click "OK." The revised information will now appear in the "System Properties" dialog box.

Doc's Booklets and CD

There are now four booklets in my series: *Windows Hot Tips*, *The Wonder of Word*, *PowerPoint for the PowerUser*, and the latest, *Windows Hot Tips 2 (WHT3 is getting closer to completion)*. A single copy of each is \$5.00 (\$4.50 for 2-9 copies of the same title and \$4.00 for 10 or more copies). If you'd like to help with costs (*not required*), add 50 cents for *any* number of booklets you order. *Doc's Giant Utility Collection* on CD is postage paid at \$14 (2-5 copies \$13 each, and 6 or more copies \$12 each). Send orders to: *MicroManuals*; PO Box 235; Meeker, CO; 81641. Thanks again, and God bless.