Coffee and keyboards don't mix

Hanover, Germany
November 24, 2004
Sydney Morning Herald

For many workers, morning doesn't begin at the computer workstation without a cup of coffee. Yet having liquids in front of a computer is not without its dangers.

"The worst that is likely to happen to someone spilling coffee onto a desktop computer's keyboard is that they'll have to buy a new keyboard," reports Georg Shnurer, editor at the computer magazine c't.

The same accident is much more serious for a laptop, however, since the liquid has a direct path to the sensitive parts of a computer.

"Drying and cleaning can possibly help," says Martin Steiner, product manager for laptop maker Dell. If the fluid makes it all the way into the innards of the machine and causes a short circuit, then that machine is a goner, though.

"Liquids act as conductors, and if one gets between two leads, it can cause a short circuit," explains Hans Juergen Werner from semiconductor maker Intel.

This damage can also occur later, once the computer seems to have already been dried up and is working again. Drops of fluid may still remain inside. Once the notebook is transported, they move and can cause damage when they come into contact with sensitive electronic parts.

Dell approaches this kind of problem from two angles. On the one hand, users can choose to buy Complete Care Service for their laptop, which will insure clumsy users against liquid-induced damages.

Every laptop keyboard also comes with a protective sheet below it that is intended to prevent the penetration of water into the computer.

"You're in luck if the liquid hits in the middle, between the T, Z, G, and H," Steiner says. Good fortune is less likely if the drink seeps into the sides. "Then the liquid can get around the plastic film and cause damage," says Steiner.

As soon as coffee or some other liquid is poured into a laptop, the power should be cut. "Turn it off, pull the plug, and take out the battery," Steiner recommends as immediate steps.
The computer should then be opened, turned over on a cloth or paper towel to allow the liquid to run out and for the computer to dry out.

"You can also help out a bit with a hair dryer," says Intel's Werner. In order to prevent things from getting too hot, the hairdryer shouldn't be held too close to the machine, and then only in short bursts.

"Don't even think about the microwave," says c't editor Schnurer. It can be several days before the computer is entirely dried out.

"As long as you're not all left hands, it's probably okay to unscrew the keyboard on your own and wipe the pieces dry a bit," Steiner says. The computer's chips are encased and are therefore protected, Werner says. If the coffee was black or the drink was water, then the damages will hopefully be relatively minor.

"Anything that is sticky causes more damage," Schnurer says. This includes coffee with milk and sugar, sweetened tea, fruit drinks, and even plain milk.

"Cola is the worst, because it corrodes the material," Schnurer says. If such drinks are spilled, radical measures are called for.

"The laptop should be brought to a specialist and cleaned," says Schnurer. That can be expensive, because once the computer is taken apart, every individual piece must be treated with a cleaning spray.

"That can last an entire day, with the metre ticking for every hour of labour," Schnurer says. Yet laptop users should be grateful if this kind of cleaning is all that is needed to get their mobile computer back on its feet.

"When dealing with laptops, things can get irreparable in a hurry," Schnurer adds.

Steiner also points out that quick action is needed after an accident.

"You shouldn't stop to make a backup of current files," he says.
You need to think about what is more important: Keeping the computer in order, or securing the latest files. This is why Schnurer recommends burning important files regularly onto CD or DVD.

Hans-Juergen Rehm from IBM has a further tip for laptop users: "The best thing to do is put a thick magazine under the computer," he says. This leaves its underside dry even if water gets on the desktop.

Things are generally less traumatic in the event of a desktop computer accident. The keyboard is usually alone on the desktop, with the computer itself a safe distance away.

For models without a plastic sheet over the keys, the same rules apply: "Turn the keyboard over, dry it out, and clean," says Rehm. Wireless keyboards should also have their batteries removed as soon as possible.

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