Tale of Two Gadgets/USB Irreconcilable Differences/Scanner Insurgency

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. Two new gadgets, both of which worked beautifully alone, but neither of which would work when paired with the other. Kind of like the Sunni's and the Shia. Since one of the gadgets was my new digital pro model Olympus DS 4000 dictating unit, for which I had paid large dollars to go with my failed memory and high hopes, this was critical. My other gadget was a Fujitsu Scansnap scanner with a document feeder that automatically converted scanned documents into a pdf format, without me having to ask my secretary to scan and email back to me. Both plugged directly into USB ports on the back of my desktop. Unfortunately, the devices hate each other, as neither will work when plugged in at the same time.

I am old. I remember monkeying with video and sound cards, and whatever else came along, by having to set and flip dip switches, so that the device "interrupt" did not conflict with other devices on my system. I have never fully understood what an interrupt is, but I know that when an interrupt on one device conflicts, by having the same interrupt as another, then usually the computer locks up, nothing works, and life is miserable. Over time, vendors allowed you to change interrupts with software switches, and later, the computer would figure it out automatically when "plug and play" came along. Then came XP, USB, and I thought the age of interrupt conflicts was over. Not.

It appears that conflicts are still a fact of life with PC's, although Apple has never, ever had this problem. If only Apple had won the business hardware wars instead of IBM, I would not have to write this column. But I digress.

For the first 30 years of my practice, I used an old Lanier dictation system where I dictated to a central taping system and my secretary could plug into the system and pick it up, even as I was dictating. This meant that you could start dictating, get a phone call, forget that you were dictating, and soon get a half letter with a cryptic note to finish your dictation, dummy. Memory lapses did not penalize you, as the secretary had a magic red button that glowed when you dictated, so she knew there was dictation waiting.

When it died (Lanier stopped supporting it 10 years ago and there were no parts to be had), I moved down to mini-tapes, which some people have used successfully for years. But these people obviously have memories. I was a failure. When I dropped the recorder to get a phone call, I frequently forgot that I was dictating, and there was no magic red button to let anyone know that I had dictation. So it sat on my desk until I started looking for dictation *I knew* I had done three days earlier. Given that this is an "I needed it yesterday" world, this was not good for the Summers' well oiled practice. So I started looking for something automatic that would allow me to be a forgetful idiot. And I thought I found it in the Olympus DS 4000.

This has lots of buttons, multiple file storage options, great sound, memory, and pretty simple to operate. But I could care less. I wanted it for its ability to automatically download my dictation, and then email it to my secretary, without my having to do

anything other than set it in its cradle. So I bought it, installed it, and it worked as advertised. For a total of two days. That's when I installed a new Fujitsu Scansnap scanner, which also had a USB connection. The scanner was wonderful. You popped a pleading or photos in, hit a button, and it created a pdf file in an email. Small foot print on desk, superfast, and easy. Way cool. Except that the first time I tried to download my dictation after the scanner installation, the computer went into "Lockup of Death" mode, which means that I had to unplug the CPU to unscrew it up.

I fiddled, updated drivers and firmware, re-installed software and same results. I called Olympus, who asked me to perform a conflict check in XP Hardware Manager. I did, and no yellow warning signs to indicate a problem. Then I mentioned the new scanner, and the lady laughed, and told me it was my fault the Olympus did not work, and that I had to unplug the scanner if I wanted my Olympus to work. It seems that XP thinks that the Olympus and the Scansnap are both scanners, it gets confused, and then goes into a computer coma. But XP does not tell you why it's in a coma. No conflict warning lights up.

"Let me get this straight," I huffed. "You manufacture a device that conflicts with another device that your company knows is likely to be plugged into a computer, and you make no provision to resolve conflicts?" "Unfortunately, no, " she replied. "If you want to use our product, which you admit works fine when the scanner is not plugged in, you will have to remove it and the drivers."

If you are waiting for the magical "happy ever after" ending, you are not getting it. The Windows XP site notes that this is a problem, and the only solution it offers is to unplug one device, reboot, and then plug in the other. This is not a solution. This is a time death sentence. I have searched in vain for a work around, but can't find a realistic one. One suggestion I read was to disable the interrupts on all devices, reboot the computer, and then manually reset each one, hoping to find the right combination. I consider the author of that an idiot, as you could lose multiple devices and pay hell to get them back. So now I look like Bill Jeter or Mission Control with multiple computers and monitors on my desk, so that I can have my dictation and scanner too.   But it works.

And it appears that I am not alone. I have learned that the interrupt irreconcilable differences conflict happens frequently when scanners are paired with cameras, some printers, dictation and other input/output devices that plug into USB or parallel ports.

Consider Apple.