

I Know It's Here Somewhere

You turn off your computer with a sense of satisfaction. You downloaded the results of several stocks screens and company data for the contenders, built a spreadsheet to manipulate the numbers into something meaningful, authored a few documents with your notes about the investment prospects, and exported a few stock studies to share with your club members. The next day that sense of satisfaction is gone. While you were working the night before, you split your attention between your work and your daughter's rousing rendition of *Three Blind Mice*—and now some of those magnificent files are nowhere to be found.

Sure, your computer operating system has a command to help you find those files. But, if you're like most people, you shudder at the prospect of clicking this, clicking that, and answering **all** those questions! What are you looking for? When was it modified? How big is it? Where do you want to look? Then, when you finish the third degree, you wait while the search command looks for your files. And you wait. If your computer runs Windows XP, you watch the animated puppy wag its tail and stare at you as hopefully as the real dog at your feet waiting for its breakfast. You wonder why the Microsoft developers decided to endow both the animated character AND the search engine with doglike characteristics. Finally, the search finishes and you see a list of hundreds of files. Your missing files are in there somewhere.

Searching Your Computer with Google

Putting up with this behavior was bad enough when that's all there was. Then, we got hooked on searching the Web with Google and the Windows and Mac find functions seemed so, well, inferior. Take heart. A few months ago, Google introduced the Google Desktop Search. Packed with the technology and clean interface design that makes your Web searches so easy, the Google Desktop Search can find files, email, instant messages, and web pages you've viewed (even when you aren't online.) If you use Windows 2000 or Windows XP, head to <http://desktop.google.com> and download this tool: it's free and you're going to love it.

Of course, the Google Desktop Search can find your files by name. Every search tool does that. It can also find words or phrases in some types of documents, such as Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, which is helpful when a few errant keystrokes changed the name of your unpublished, but sure to be a best-selling, novel to something like "wha5%^&\$7so.doc."

But, the Google Desktop Search does much, much more. Think about how many Web pages you've surfed. Then, add in all the emails and instant messages you've sent or received. As you've probably discovered, that is one heck of a lot of information that you can't find when you need it. The Google Desktop Search can digest every bit of this information and regurgitate it in the blink of an eye—much like that even more sophisticated search engine, your 1-year-old.

Note: As I'm writing this, the Google Desktop Search is still in beta testing, which means it isn't finished yet. Beta testing doesn't necessarily mean a swarm of bugs in the software. For now, beta mostly means that the tool can search only Web pages that you viewed only with Internet Explorer and it can't search within some types of files, Adobe Acrobat pdf files for example. It can only handle email within Outlook and Outlook Express and instant message sent with AOL Instant Messenger.

Just like its online counterpart, the Google Desktop Search looks startlingly simple, as demonstrated in Figure 1. In fact, you have to look closely to notice that you aren't online. Below the familiar Google logo are the words "Desktop Search." You'll also notice that the address in the Address box isn't a Web address, but something mostly unintelligible that actually points to your computer. Simply type a name, topic, keywords in the search box and click Desktop. The tool hunts through your files, emails, Web pages, and instant messages for information that matches. (Notice the Search the Web button. You can use the desktop search tool to perform Web searches, too.

Figure 1 The Google Desktop Search interface is as clean as that of its online cousin.

To use the Google Desktop Search on a Windows computer, double-click its icon in the Windows system tray (that's the toolbar typically on the right side of your Windows taskbar.) The icon looks like several interconnecting rings in Google red, blue, yellow, and green. When you click Search Desktop, you'll see list of items that match your search. Icons to the left of each entry tell you whether the result is a Word document, a Web page, or the other types of information that the tool searches. If the result is a Web page, the tool even shows a preview of the page. To open the file for a result, just click the link.

*Note: You can view Google Desktop Search results another way. Once you install the tool, your online Google searches include a new link at the very top of your search results that says something like, "60 more results found on your computer." When you search with the Google Web page (<http://www.google.com>), you receive search results from the Web **and** your computer. Although a reference to your computer appearing on a Google Web page might make you a bit uneasy, rest assured that your desktop searches don't go to Google.*

Suppose you're presenting online investing tips to an audience and you don't want to see your desktop results on your Google Web page. You can hide the desktop results link (click Hide next to the desktop link on the Google Web page) or set a preference to prevent desktop results from appearing at all. (Click Desktop Preferences and then turn off the Show Desktop Search results on Google Web Search result pages check box.)

Setting Up the Google Desktop Search

The Google Desktop Search program is tiny—but the index that it creates is humongous. Don't plan on using the Google Desktop Search if your disk drive is packed tighter than your hips in your high school band uniform. You should have at least one gigabyte of space free on your hard drive, but the more the better. When you install the Google Desktop Search, it starts to create the index. You can tell it to ignore some of your folders, files, and Web addresses, but the bottom line is the index won't be complete for several hours, perhaps even an entire day.

Building the index won't inhibit your work, though. The tool only works on the index while your computer is idle. As soon as you start working, it takes a break. You can even shut your computer down before the index is finished. The tool picks up where it left off when you reboot.

After the index is in place, the tool continues to add to the index every document, Web page, email, and instant message that it can handle. If you're searching the Web for your spouse's birthday present and you don't want the Tiffany's and Wal-Mart Web pages showing up in desktop results, you can tell the Google Desktop Search tool to stop indexing for a while. Click the Google Desktop Search icon in the system tray and then choose Pause Indexing. When indexing is on hold, you'll see a reminder every so often to turn it back on. You can also turn off secure Web pages, so financial transactions don't pop up in results.

Link of the Month

If you're concerned about becoming totally dependent on Google, there are other desktop search tools. In fact, given Google's beta status, many of these tools are more powerful. For example, some tools can search multiple disk drives, even computers on a network. A few are free and most offer free trials, but the better tools come with a price tag. To learn about other options, go to <http://www.searchtools.com/tools/desktop-search.html>.

However, if you've grown to appreciate the simplicity and raw speed of Google searching, none of these other options will make you happy.