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It's now a race to the finish line — the final six weeks of busy season, and the fastest push to get returns done quickly and efficiently. So the last thing you need right now is a hardware failure that takes a workstation out of commission and leaves you or a staff member with hours lost to nothingness.

Fortunately, most of the hardware problems you will encounter in the next six weeks can be avoided with a small investment. And now is the time to take an hour, make the investment, and pull together five essential tips and tools that can get you through the season.

- 1. Track down the original CDs for your operating system.** If a driver goes crunch in the night, you won't have time to go looking for the CD that the admin person who retired last year put somewhere in a filing cabinet. Pull out the CD (and any others that might be helpful, like the driver disk for your video card), put them in a plastic bag, and tape them to the wall above your computer so you will know instantly where to find them.
- 2. Buy a new keyboard and mouse.** You can buy an inexpensive keyboard for about \$15 online, a mouse for less. In the midst of tax season, you'll be eating at your desk more than one night. Even if you don't, it's hard to work that many hours without some kind of beverage that will spill into the keys and bring the keyboard to a grinding halt. Or you could have the tiny ball on the bottom of the mouse finally read the end of its useful life and refuse to move the cursor. Whatever. With a little advance planning, you can hot-swap the damaged device and keep going with only about 60 seconds of down time.

3. Buy an inexpensive video card. Nearly all of the problems

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... or at least you know you should have one (and will get around to it once busy season is over). Besides, that stuff can be expensive, and you don't have the time to spend messing with it, and so on. Okay. Here's the next best thing: [Seagate](#)

is offering a 1.5 terabyte external hard drive for just \$112.49 plus shipping.

The offer is only good until April 1, 2009, and you must enter the code

T4346M\$Q6GRJB\$ at checkout. And it is only

formatted for Windows XP and Vista. But it is a USB 2.0 device at an incredible price that should hold all of the tax files for a small office. Backup is the best defense against a hard drive or network drive failure. Thanks to [Rick](#)

[Broida over at CNET](#) for digging this up.

5. Turn off automatic updates. I know, automatic updates are handy and they keep your computer safe from new viruses. And if you don't update your computer, you might void the warranty and so on and so on. We're talking about busy season here. Turn off all the automatic anythings

on your work computer so that the machine doesn't suddenly freeze up for three hours while it downloads the latest update to Windows that will likely have at least one bug in it to crash your machine completely. For Windows users, the switch to turn automatic updates off is found in the Control Panel. There is nothing that will be update in the next six weeks that is worth the time lost, and anything that needs to be updated now can wait until after busy season. If the machine is stable today, keep it that way.

There are other trinkets and ideas I keep in my personal 9-1-1 toolkit. I

keep the URL for the manufacturer of my motherboard handy, and the one for

[Microsoft's](#)

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And peace of mind is what it's all about. So if you have your own favorite tool for an office IT 9-1-1 tip or tool, drop me a note.

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Technology

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