

Stay Organized With Notepad and Info.txt

by Joe Stoddard

Conventional information management programs like ACT! can be great tools for organizing contacts, appointments, and other business information, but they may be overkill for small contractors who just want to get organized and don't have time to master complicated software. Daily chores like recording directions to a supplier or job site, or pulling numbers off your answering machine require something you can access quickly and enter information into easily. There is

also the "junk drawer" of information you use often but not often enough to memorize: your FedEx account number...the name of that oddball Formica pattern...your ISP's toll-free dial-up number. As contractors, we tend to scribble such information on scraps of paper or a chunk of 2x4 — it's used once, then lost forever.

You can buy one of dozens of computer programs to help you organize your data, but I have yet to find anything as reliable or easy to learn as good

old Notepad, the free text editor that ships with every copy of Windows. (Mac users have a similar text editor called Simple Text.) If you create an "info.txt" file and put a shortcut to it on your desktop, you'll have an electronic "staging area" for storing, organizing, and retrieving all the information that comes across your desk each day (see Figure 1).

Setting It Up

To do this, first create a new folder where you can store your info.txt file:

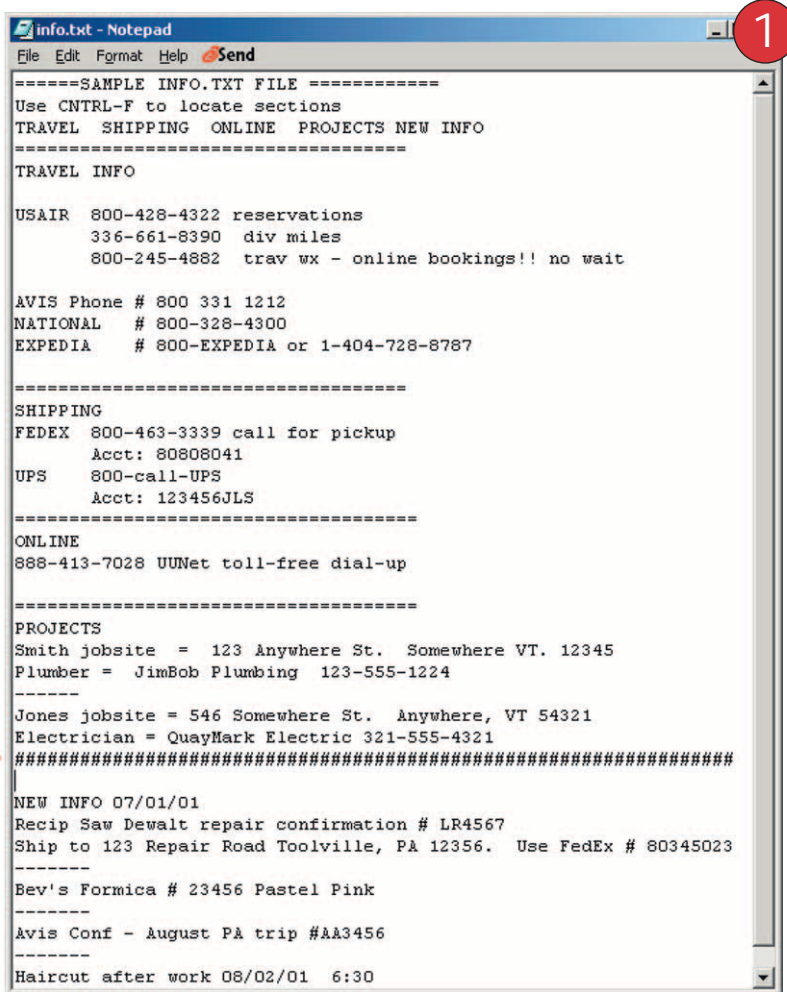
- 1 Double-click (using the left mouse button) the My Documents icon on your desktop to open that folder.
- 2 Right-click (using the right mouse button) on a blank area within the window that opens and select (with the left mouse button) New, and then Folder from the drop-down menu.
- 3 When the new folder appears, type in a name, and then press ENTER to save it. I named the folder with my initials.

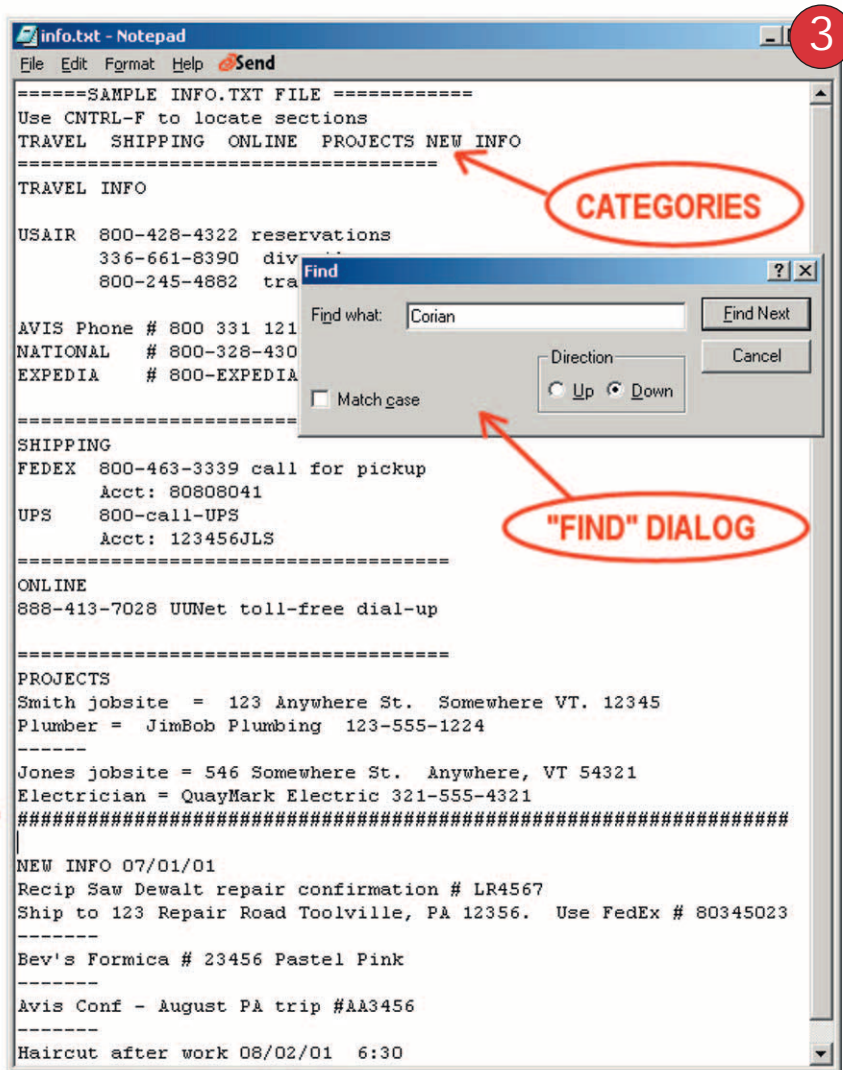
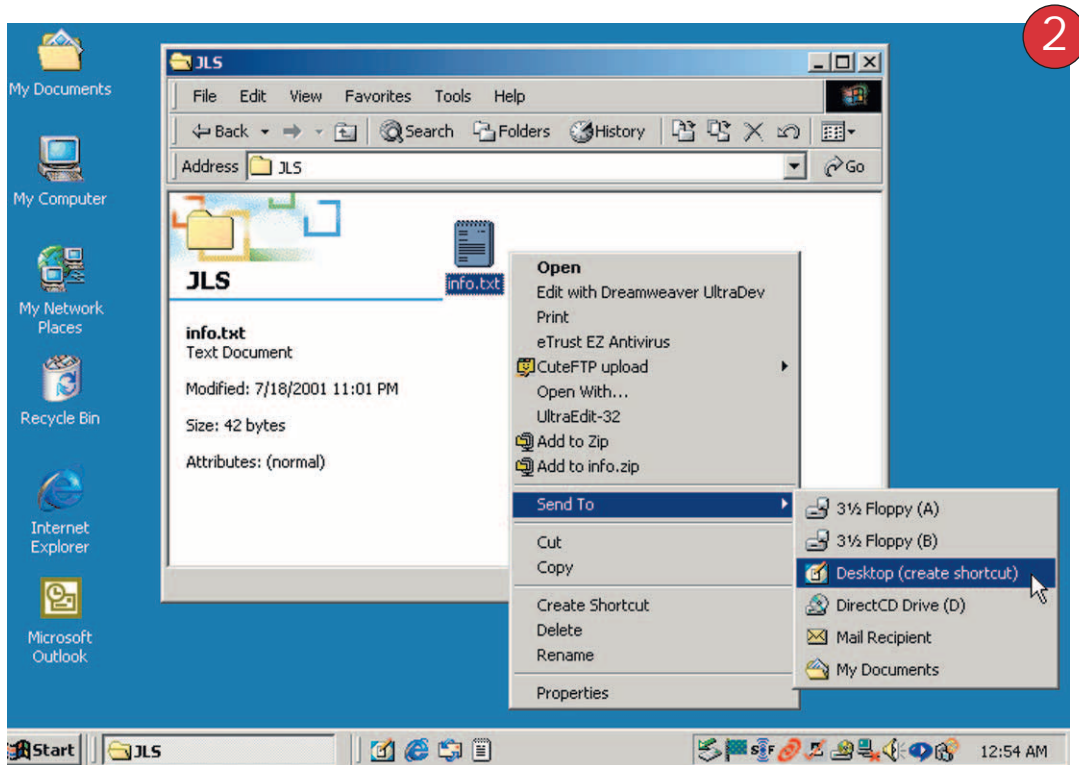
To create the info.txt file:

- 1 Double-click the folder you just created to open it.
- 2 Right-click on a blank area within the window that opens; select New and then Text Document.
- 3 When the new file appears, type in info.txt to name it, and then press ENTER to save it.

Notepad can also be reached from the Windows Start button by clicking Start→Programs→Accessories→Notepad.

Finally, to create a desktop shortcut: Right-click the file you just created



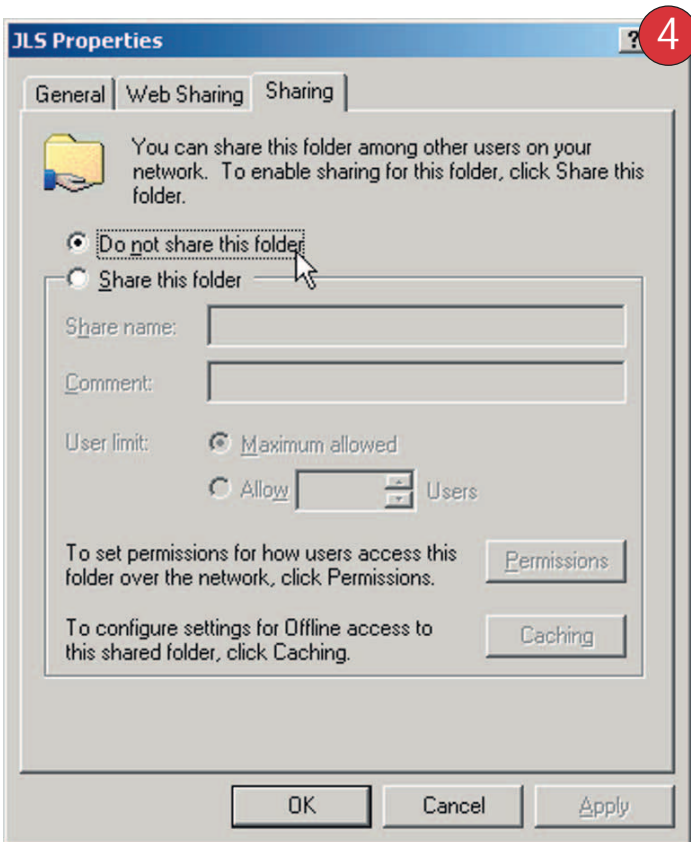


and select Send To, and then Desktop (Figure 2). By double-clicking that desktop shortcut, you can fire up info.txt instantly whenever you want to add or retrieve information.

Using Info.txt

My info.txt file is separated into two distinct areas. The top half is organized into permanent categories for items I need to access on a regular basis (for example, TRAVEL, SHIPPING, PROJECTS), while the bottom is used ad hoc as a temporary staging area for the hodgepodge of information that comes through the door daily. This is where I type phone numbers from my answering machine, record notes during phone conversations, and cut and paste confirmation numbers from e-mail and Web sites. I keep things neat by using a line of equal signs to create dividers between the main categories, and a line of pound signs to separate the top and bottom of the file (Figure 3).

Just like the staging area at a real job site, the more you add to info.txt, the more disorganized it will become. To stay on top of the clutter, every month or so I take a couple of minutes to delete



out-of-date information (for example, a confirmation number for a trip I've completed) and move items I want to keep from the bottom of the file into a permanent category at the top. If I've gathered names, addresses, and phone numbers that should become part of my permanent records, I also copy those into my regular information management or accounting programs. The simple text format makes it easy to cut and paste in and out of just about any other Windows application without retyping.

Retrieving Information


As you use it, your info.txt file will quickly become too long to fit on one screen, and storing tons of data won't do you a lick of good if you can't retrieve it at will. Luckily, Notepad makes use of the Windows Find command (see Figure 3). To bring up the Find dialog box, simply press CNTRL-F on your keyboard or click Edit→Find on the menu bar using your mouse. "Find" will locate any string of text in the file, not just whole words. For example, if you're looking for "Corian" but are not sure how to spell it, typing "Cor" and clicking "Find Next" repeatedly should get you there. If you've recently done a Find, you can repeat it by pressing the F3 key.

Find is not supposed to care about upper- or lower-case let-

ters unless you select the "match case" checkbox, but it doesn't always work that way. I've found it to be most reliable on searches for all-upper- or all-lower-case words. For that reason, I make my main categories all capital letters and list them at the top of the file as reminders (see Figure 3). As a bonus, by highlighting a category word with my mouse and then using Copy (CNTRL-C) and Paste (CNTRL-V) commands to place that word in the Find dialog box, I can eliminate the possibility of case and spelling errors and get right to the section I want every time.

Security Precautions

Info.txt is a great tool for staying organized, but since it's a simple text file, there's no foolproof way to protect its contents. I've used an info.txt file for years without any problems, but you should still use some common sense to keep your data as secure as possible:

- 1 Don't leave info.txt open on your screen when you're not around. Get into the habit of closing or at least minimizing the file when you're finished using it.
- 2 Enter credit card and other sensitive data at your own risk. If you absolutely need that kind of information in your file, you can make it much tougher to steal by leaving out or transposing a few digits.
- 3 The contents of a *shared* folder can be easily accessed on your company LAN (local area network — your computer network) or even across an always-on Internet connection such as a cable modem. To un-share a folder (on most Windows computers), right-click on the folder and choose Properties. On the Sharing tab, select the "Do not share this folder" radio button (Figure 4). Do the same on the Web Sharing tab if it's present.
- 4 Rename the file, shortcut, and/or folder something less obvious than "info." Right-click the folder, file, or shortcut and choose "Rename." When the cursor appears, type in the new name.
- 5 If you're using Windows NT or 2000 (or soon-to-be-released XP), learn to take advantage of the enhanced security features of those operating systems. 

Remember, it doesn't require an airport laptop thief or sophisticated network hacker to get at your information — the after-hours janitor, office snoop, and even your teenager are all possible candidates.

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