By Susan Sales Harkins

IT professionals are unique, like snowflakes. Degrees, training, intelligence, creativity, and experience all matter, but they combine to craft distinctly specific skill sets. Perhaps that's one reason there are so many utilities and tools driving the support industry. In fact, there are so many that shopping for just the right tool can be overwhelming. So I asked several IT pros to list the tools they depend on -- and I received some surprising results. Their lists are (almost) as unique as they are. Try matching the following IT pros to your job role and skills. Perhaps their lists will help you narrow your search for useful tools and utilities. The good news for all of us is that most of these tools are freeware. Note: Comments in quotes belong to the IT professional.

#1: John Bartow, consultant

John Bartow's areas of expertise are network and PC security, which he provides via his consulting firm, WinHaven Computer Consulting Services. Because he's onsite so much, he carries the following tools with him at all times:

- RoboForm Pro and Portable: Password manager, form filler, and password management.
- CCleaner: File system and registry cleaner.
- Autoruns: Startup process manager; shows programs configured to run during system bootup or login.
- Process Explorer: Lets you see which handles and DLL processes are open.
- Vipre: Antivirus, malware, and rootkit software.
- Spybot S&D: Suite of PC security products.
- SIW: Software Information for Windows; gathers and displays detailed information about system properties and settings.
- DotNet cleanup tool (dotnetfx_cleanup_tool): Aaron Stebner's tool Automated cleanup tool for removing the .NET Framework.
- Auslogics Disk Defrag: Hard drive defragmenting software.
- Auslogics Registry Defrag: Registry defragmenting software.

#2: Sterling Camden, consultant

Camden Software Consulting, in Bainbridge Island, WA, specializes in migrating existing applications to new technologies. (Its owner, Sterling Camden, also hosts TechRepublic's IT Consultant blog.) Vim and Ruby products are his favorite tools, but Camden relies on several others, which he keeps on a laptop that goes everywhere he goes:

- Vim: "Powerful" text editor.
- Google Chrome: Windows browser that's getting a lot of good reviews.
- Ruby: "One of the most popular scripting languages."
- Synergy/DE: Suite of advanced cross-platform software tools for Windows, UNIX, and OpenVMS. (Camden consults for Synergex, the vendor.)
- PVCS Configuration Builder: Automates and accelerates software builds across multiple platforms.
- PVCS Version Manager: Source control.
- PuTTY: Telnet and SSH for Windows and UNIX.
- FileZilla: Open source FTP client and server.
- VMware: Virtualization technology products.
- Visual Studio 2008: Suite of development tools.

#3: John W. Colby, consultant

John W. Colby specializes in business analysis, database design, and programming. He is a past president and a current board member of Database Advisors, Inc., an online technical support group. Currently living in North Carolina, Colby uses various remote access tools to provide consulting services to clients around the country:

- C2DbFW3G: Custom framework for Access.
- MZ-Tools: Enhanced programming tools for VB and VBA programmers.
- LogMeIn Hamachi: VPN service.
- VNC: Integrated security.
- VMware Infrastructure: Virtualization for individual machines and servers.
- Comodo Internet Security: Firewall and Antivirus suite.
- ThreatFire: Antivirus software.

#4: Donna Cook, applications analyst

An analyst in the medical industry, Donna Cook uses the following tools to work through the myriad projects she manages:

- CSVed: Manipulate Excel files (.xls). "…great tool for anyone who hates Excel."
- Copernic Desktop Search: Windows Desktop Search tool.
- Irfanview: Fast graphic viewer/conversion tool for Windows.
- eCleaner: Strips HTML symbols, formatting codes, and so on.
- CoreFTP: Free, user-friendly, secure FTP application for Windows.
- SiSoft Sandra: Gathers information about a machine.
- Lan Monitor: Displays information about every network adapter on your computer.
- SendToAny: Extends the Windows Send To menu to include anything on your Programs menu.

#5: Deborah Elam, consultant

Specializing in SQL and VB.NET applications, Deborah Elam recommends two administrative tools:

- Auto FE Updater: Updates front-end applications in a multi-user environment. "It's a lifesaver!"
- DNS source script: Creates DSNs from code. "…moving computers and new users requires much less maintenance."

#6: Steve Erbach, software development

Steve Erbach supplies custom software for the printing industry. With a lot of responsibilities, Erbach uses a lot of tools:

- NoteTab: Award-winning text and HTML editor.
- HardCopy: Screen capture utility. "…relaxed shareware license…"
- Paint.NET: Image and photo editing software.
- ColorPic: "Superb" pop-up color picker control for Web pages.
- Irfanview: Fast graphic viewer for Windows.
- Windows Grep: Graphical text search and replace tool.
- CPU-Z: Quickly review information about system's devices.
- FireBug: Web debugging tool. "… absolutely outstanding…nothing beats the DOM information and JavaScript debugging…"

- SpinRite: Data recovery.
- AutoHotKey: Automate keystrokes and mouse clicks. "…full-featured for recording mouse movements and keystrokes."
- Process Explorer: Lets you see which handles and DLL processes are open. "Excellent and detailed information…"
- FileMon and Process Monitor: Monitor Windows.
- RootkitRevealer: Rootkit detection utility.
- Belarc Advisor: Profile system -- iInstalled software, hardware, missing hotfixes, antivirus status, security benchmarks, and more.
- WinPatrol: Improve system performance.
- Win2PDF: Install PDF functionality as a printer.
- XML Notepad 2007: Browse and edit XML documents.
- MZ-Tools: Enhanced more than a million driver update files.
- Disktective: Disk-space reporting.
- KeePass: Password manager.
- ToDoList: NET-based to-do list.
- TreePad: Personal Information Manager (PIM).

#7: Arthur Fuller, business analyst

Arthur Fuller specializes in MS-SQL development and doubles as a database administrator (and frequent contributor to TechRepublic). He's the author of four books on database development and numerous articles. Fuller spent most of last year working (yeah… right) in Bermuda for a hedge fund. The following utilities help him keep his clients happy:

- NoteTab: Award-winning text and HTML editor. "Try this and you will never again load NotePad."
- xPlorer2: Trouble-free desktop file management. "…fabulous for copying data between directories or hard disk or memory stick."

#8: Stuart McLachlan, information services

Stuart McLachlan, president of Lexacorp Ltd., in Papua New Guinea, manages the development of information systems. Since he's living in paradise, he tries not to waste time. He uses the following tools to keep him efficient:

- Irfanview: Fast graphic viewer/conversion tool for Windows.
- Polestar Virtual Printer: Virtual PDF and image printer.
- Foxit Reader: "Fast" PDF reader with "neat" capabilities.
- AutoIt: "BASIC-like" scripting language for automating Windows GUI and more.
- PowerBASIC: A Windows compiler. "…small, fast, no dependencies…"
- ZTree: "The best file/directory manager out there."
- VirtualBox: Virtualization products for x86 systems. "Great for developing in one environment and then testing in others."
- FireFTP: FTP client plug for Firefox.
- NetSetManPro: Network settings manager. "I can go to any of my clients' sites and hook my laptop into their network without changing all sorts of settings."

#9: Karen Rosenstiel, Web developer

Karen Rosenstiel designs and develops Web sites for small businesses and nonprofit organizations, with an expertise in accessibility features. Her list is short, but specific to her detailed work:

- **UltraEdit**: "…an excellent all-around programming editor."
- **UltraCompare**: Compare and merge files, directors, documents, zip archives, and so on.

#10: Francisco Tapia, database administrator

Francisco Tapia maintains and monitors 26 SQL Server systems in a manufacturing environment in California. As you can imagine, performance is a huge issue for Tapia, who likes to develop his own monitoring applications and runs security policies for system applications and products (SAP) systems. Tapia also markets a commercial product that monitors SQL Server systems. Tapia is a magician with code and currently relies on a number of Red-Gate products:

- **SQL Backup**: Compresses and encrypts SQL Server backups; "… fairly inexpensive and it just works."
- **SQL Prompt**: Intelligent code completion and layout for SQL Server. "Accelerates all my programming."
- **SQL Response**: Tapia is currently beta testing this SQL Server monitor tool and he likes it.
- **SQL Compare**: Moves SQL Server data from development to production.
- **SQL Diagnostic Manager**: Monitors SQL Server.

#11: Jon Tydda, IT technician

With more than a decade of experience in first-, second-, and third-line IT support, Jon Tydda now provides his expertise to pharmaceutical research and development in the United Kingdom. He also spends an extraordinary amount of time fixing his friends' broken computers. Tydda's "can't live without" tools are:

- **Ad-Aware**: The original anti-spyware company, so LavaSoft says.
- **Spybot-S&D**: Detects and removes spyware.
- **ZoneAlarm**: A suite of security products.
- **AVG Anti-Virus**: Antivirus and Internet security.
- **Startup Control Panel**: A simple user interface that lets you choose which programs launch when you start your computer.
- **Process Explorer**: Lets you see which handles and DLL processes are open or loaded.
- **Trojan Hunter**: Protects system from Trojans.
- **MalwareBytes Anti-Malware**: Detects and removes malware "where others fail."

#12: Dan Waters, business systems

Dan Waters' company, ProMation Systems, Inc., develops business process management systems (BPMS) for companies that want to be more competitive and effective by automating their internal business processes. His tools of choice:

- **MZ-Tools**: Enhanced programming tools for VB and VBA programmers.
- **Find & Replace**: Add-in for Microsoft Access that lets you quickly rename design objects.
- **Access Analyzer**: Provides extensive documentation and analysis of Microsoft Access databases.
- **SimplyVBA Global Error Handler**: Sophisticated add-in for recording a great deal of information about errors.

#13: Drew Wutka, network administrator

Drew Wutka is a network systems administrator with database and programming skills. Currently, he provides IT skills for the defense, space, photonics, telecommunications, and medical industries. When he can't find just the right tool, Wutka sometimes writes his own (such as MoveWindows, in his list below). Here are some of his favorites:

- **Virtual PC**: Create and run virtual machines on a single computer.
- **Virtual Server**: Run every Microsoft operating system from one platform.

- **Remote Administrator (radmin)**: "Great tool for administrating your network."
- **MoveWindows**: Custom application that captures all of the open windows on your machine. "Handy for multiple monitor issues when an application gets lost."

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