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Bull's Eye for dropping shortcuts
Office Labs

Microsoft's New Start Menu

Application launching utility from Microsoft

To work faster and with less frustration - a goal we are all striving to achieve, especially given the hectic times we live in. Quick as lightning access to documents, files and the websites you are usually working with should be a standard these days. Application launchers are a good idea and, in this particular case, a program from Microsoft caught my attention. Speed Launch is totally free of charge and designed to improve access to data on the computer, as well as to online locations. It is not a revolutionary product but it has its upsides, compared with all the rest on the market. To use the application, you have to agree to participating in Microsoft Office Labs Usage Metrics and Auto Update, so some information on your system may be transmitted to them. I took a peek in the Privacy Policy for you because I know that 99% of users generally install a software using the "automatic-Next-button-press" method. All collected information will be used by Microsoft and its controlled subsidiaries and affiliates. However, the key phrase is "personal information you provide will not be transferred to third parties without your consent". If you skip all the common "blah-blah-blah" usually contained by such privacy policies and draw the line, all this is nothing else but a tracking cookie turned to the good side of the Force and designed to help them improve their products. After you get past the Privacy Policy and agree to the stipulations of the License Agreement, you are ready to start using the application. You may notice nothing at the beginning but, if you look in the right hand corner of the desktop, you'll see a target mark. That is in fact Speed Launch, ready to take your order and to be configured according to your needs. Using the application is definitely no rocket science, since it can actually be managed quite easily. The basic principle relies on dragging and dropping the shortcut into the bull's eye, and typing in the name for the newly created shortcut. Absolutely any file stored on your hard disk will be appended to Speed Launch's shortcut list - no questions asked. If you are looking to save web locations and to launch them with the program, nothing could be simpler, as the same drag and drop principle applies in this case as well: drag the favicon from the address bar in your web browser to the target mark and enter the shortcut name. Speed Launch comes with a set of predefined shortcuts for you to use, and these include web locations for searching images, movies, checking stock quotes, the weather or launching Wikipedia. A special shortcut, called MegaSearch, allows you to look for a query using the three search giants on the market: Google, Live and Yahoo!. The procedure is simple, as the application lets you type in the query and then opens the pages of the three search engines in separate tabs in your default web browser. Double-clicking on the target mark of the software will open a shortcut menu, which displays five buttons, each launching a different shortcut. What is interesting about these is that they are not static and, in fact, change according to the frequency of use, just like in Windows Start menu, when an often-used shortcut ascends to the topmost position. A drop-down menu shows all the shortcuts currently available to Speed Launch, thus enabling you to easily select exactly the one you need. To find an entry faster, all you have to do is start typing the name of the shortcut and the application will try to guess your option via the auto-complete function. The shortcut manager sported by the program allows users to make small modifications to the current list by deleting or adding new entries. Nevertheless, its limitations are quite annoying, given that you cannot edit a shortcut or its target, but only delete it or add a new item. An aspect that really sets Speed Launch apart from almost all the other application launchers on the market (my favorite included) is its ability to add multiple targets with the same tag, and to open them all at once. So, if you have a bunch of programs whose launch is part of your daily routine (let's say, for instance,

the email client, web browser, instant messenger and feed reader), with Speed Launch they can all share the same shortcut name and be deployed together. The same goes for web locations because the application can also work as a bookmark manager/session manager and launch multiple websites at once. This makes for a great quality, one that is not often encountered in many paid versions of application launchers. The interface may not be much, but it can carry out the job alright, easily and comfortably for the user. The floating bull's eye can be placed absolutely anywhere on the screen, including over the system tray. It turns translucent when it is not needed and the focus is on something else, and it gradually goes opaque once you hover your mouse over it. There is also the option of getting rid of it altogether, but you have to bear in mind that dragging and dropping the shortcuts in it is the only way to add new items.

The Good The application makes for a good launcher if you are not looking for something fancy or complicated. It was built with one purpose in mind and that is to offer fast access to data on your computer. Its main advantage consists in that you can assign the same tag to multiple shortcuts and open them all at once.

The Bad The interface is in serious need of a redesign and there are plenty of options to be added. Shortcut Manager does not provide the "luxury" of editing the items. All you can do is delete or add new ones. Also, it would be great if one could launch the stored shortcuts by simply using the keyboard.

The Truth Speed Launch is easy to use, free of charge and does a great job with both data on your computer, as well as with web links. During testing, it did not give me any trouble and proved to be stable. However, it is shy of flexibility, while some options, such as grouping the shortcuts into directories or providing you with the simple editing function, are not present. On the other hand, if you are not looking for a professional application launcher but just for something better than the Start Menu in Windows, then Speed Launch is the deal.

Here are some snapshots of the application in action: