

Review of Microsoft's New 'Remove Hidden Data' Tool

On 5 Jan 04, Microsoft released a new tool for Microsoft Office XP and Office 2003 called the Remove Hidden Data (RHD) add-in. This new tool is supposed to allow a user to “permanently remove hidden data and collaboration data from their Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and Microsoft PowerPoint files.” The Microsoft add-in is similar to other commercial products listed on the SRS EDS Webpage (<http://www.stg.srs.com/eds>) except that it is free. This add-in may help with your electronic document transfer needs, but it is not a complete solution. It is very important that users understand the limitations of this new tool and other commercially available tools, so please read this following information carefully before downloading this new tool from Microsoft. The link to download the RHD Tool is provided at the end of this article.

SRS tested the new Microsoft RHD Tool using both Office XP and a trial version of Office 2003 on a Windows 2000 workstation. Our test results have been summarized below. Our test files, methods and detailed results are proprietary and will be released on a case-by-case basis to SRS customers.

1. RHD Tool failed to detect and remove many instances of hidden data in Word, Excel, and PowerPoint files. Many of the test objects missed were taken from real user's documents. In some cases, the documents were recreated to prevent disclosing sensitive data. These were not specially prepared “trick” objects intended to defeat a Meta data removal tool. Other commercially available tools also miss the same data.
2. Indiscriminate removal of hidden information will significantly alter the functionality of an electronic document. RHD Tool does warn the user about this in the GUI version. The command line option may result in electronic documents with diminished functionality that will not meet the user's needs and will not accomplish the mission.
3. RHD Tool removed some information that the SRS tool is using to identify potentially dangerous embedded objects. Running the RHD Tool before running the SRS tool may prevent the SRS tool from detecting these objects. The commercial tools also remove the same data.
4. Both the Excel and PowerPoint versions of RHD Tool damaged the format of our test documents. Some visible information in our PowerPoint documents was incorrectly identified as hidden data and removed. This could be a real problem when using the command line version of RHD Tools.
5. The RHD Tool user interface is crude when compared with the other commercial Meta data removal tools. RHD Tool crashed once during our testing when we entered a file name directly into the box provided. Apparently, this is a fully qualified file name. In all other tests, we used the browse button to name the new file.

6. The hidden data removed by RHD Tool and the commercial Meta data removal tools is essentially the same. The primary advantages of RHD Tool are the cost (free) and the command line tool, which should be used with extreme caution as noted above.

SRS is developing a software tool that is designed from the ground up to meet all of the Government's statutory and regulatory requirements for protecting National Security Information that could be hidden in electronic documents. This tool is specifically designed to facilitate the safe transfer of electronic documents across security boundaries, especially when transferring electronic documents from higher to lower classified systems. Our tool is still under development, and we are only partially funded. Because we are not fully funded, we can not project when our tool would be available. Until our tool becomes available, expeditious use of Meta data removal tools (such as RHD Tools), keyword scanners (such as NT Toolkit), and user awareness and training (which is available from SRS now) are the best line of defense against the inadvertent disclosure of sensitive and classified information when transferring and sharing electronic documents.

Woody's Office Watch, a well-known Internet site devoted to Microsoft software has also published a review of RHD Tool that is worth reading. Look for article #2 at the following site:

<http://www.woodyswatch.com/office/archtemplate.asp?v9-n01>

Microsoft's new RHD Tool can be downloaded from Microsoft at:

<http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?FamilyId=144E54ED-D43E-42CA-BC7B-5446D34E5360&displaylang=en>

Ronald D. Hackett, PE
SRS Technologies