

The program doesn't have to be run from the Start menu to earn Start menu points

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There's a second subtlety to the basic principle that determines which programs show up in the Start menu:

Each time you launch a program, it “earns a point”, and the longer you don't launch a program, the more points it loses.

Since programs earn points and not shortcuts, a program can earn points even if you don't use the Start menu to run it. In usability studies, we often see people who run programs by digging through their Program Files directory until they find an icon that looks promising and then double-click it. If there is a shortcut on the All Programs section of the Start menu that points to the same program, then that shortcut will eventually work its way onto the front page, assuming the user runs the program often enough. This is why you will see a program appear on the front page of the Start menu even though you never ran it from the Start menu. The program earned points because you ran the program manually, or because you opened a document that is associated with that program. Promoting a program run this way helps users realize that they can run Backgammon from the Start menu instead of having to open My Computer, then click on my C drive, then click on Program Files, then MSN Gaming Zone, then Windows, and then double-click the icon with the strange name `bckgzm`. I've seen usability sessions where the users did this repeatedly, and they considered it perfectly normal, albeit frustrating. “Computers are so hard to use.”

Next time, we'll look at how the pin list influences the list of frequently-used programs.

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