

UnderstandIT

From **MAY DAY CONSULTING LIMITED** in association with **Facilitators International LLP**

A publication designed to inform and enable businesses to understand the implications, costs and advantages of using Information and Communications Technology. Distributed through Chambers of Commerce.

DIGITAL ECONOMY BILL/ACT

In the run-up to the dissolution of parliament, the government has rushed the Digital Economy Bill through parliament and it has now become the Digital Economy Act 2010.

However, in the haste to clear the decks for the election, a number of controversial clauses that were being hotly debated were dropped from the act completely, or will require secondary legislation to bring them into force.

For example, clauses relating to piracy in internet downloading of copyright material and its penalties were lost, as were the broadband tax which would have imposed a £6 tax per year, per telephone line designed to fund the expansion of broadband across the UK. Other controversial areas not included were provisions for the free use of material of which the copyright is unknown or unclear.

The next government will now have the task of resurrecting these 'lost' provisions (or not, as the case may be).

FILE AND FOLDER SYNCHRONISATION

In previous versions of Windows, there has been a facility for synchronising folders between one or more PCs – specifically if you are using a laptop remotely and need to keep working files with you whilst mobile, but then need to synchronise them when connected to the network.

The Briefcase facility is Microsoft's solution to this requirement, but in many instances, the facility does not work, or doesn't meet the requirements of many users. The Briefcase facility is principally a folder that you create on the network server (or office-based desktop computer), and replicated on the laptop. Whilst away from the office, files are added, deleted or modified in the Briefcase folder on the laptop. When next connected to the office network, the files can be synchronised so that the office PC or network server files are updated to current versions.

In Vista and Windows 7, there is now a utility in CONTROL PANEL called Synchronisation Centre, that purports to provide the same facilities as Briefcase, but it doesn't. In reality, it is designed to allow you to synchronise principally media files (music and video) between your desktop PC and one or more mobile devices – iPod, MP3 players, PDAs etc.

However, in a business environment, this is not really what the average user needs. The typical requirement is to have a set of current working files on a laptop that can be updated or otherwise modified whilst away from the office, but then synchronised with the corporate files on the server when next connected to the network.

(The above scenario assumes that the user does not use a Virtual Private Network that allows you to access files on a server whilst in a remote location. – this is a different scenario, and the subject of a separate article.)

The Briefcase feature never really seems to have been taken seriously by Microsoft, and now, they are directing support enquiries on the question of file/folder synchronisation to a Microsoft "Power Toy" utility called Sync-Toy. Microsoft Power Toys are small utilities that have developed by Microsoft but have never been integrated into the base Windows operating systems.

Sync Toy (the latest version is 2.1) is a neat and very simple utility. It requires that you create "pairs" of folders in two different locations. These two locations can then be synchronised (manually) at any time. There are options for configuring Sync Toy, including:

- Multiple "pairs" of folders that can be synchronised individually or all at once.
- The ability to include or exclude particular files from the synchronisation process (for example system or hidden files).
- To check (or not) the content of each file for modifications, rather than just relying on the different date/time stamps on each file to determine whether it should be synchronised.
- Whether or not older versions of files are placed in the re-cycle bin before being overwritten.

Files that are complete or no longer require synchronising can be taken out of the synchronised folder pair and will no longer be synchronised.

This utility is free and can be downloaded from here:

<http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?familyid=c26efa36-98e0-4ee9-a7c5-98d0592d8c52&displaylang=en>

A client is currently using this utility to synchronise working files kept on a "thumb" or "pen" drive (32Gb size!), and the client reports that it has saved much time and alleviated concerns over ensuring that revisions to documents are maintained on the server and thereby available to everyone in his organisation.

SOLUTIONS FOR A DISEASE FREE INTERNET?

The continued clogging of the internet with unwanted and downright malicious spam email clearly needs some drastic action to avoid the collapse of the internet as we know it.

Many in the IT industry have been working for many years on various mechanisms for validating bona fide emails and eliminating spam, but to date, none of these technology solutions have been implemented in a serious way. This is partly because of different technology groupings coming up with alternative solutions instead of collaborating to produce a universal solution to the problem.

It's a little like the competing technologies for a video-tape standard and latterly high definition DVD standard. It ends up being left to market forces to determine the winner. Meantime, whilst the technology war continues, the consumers lose out by investing in hardware that maybe well become obsolete over-night.

The industry players involved in trying to combat the scourge of spam email (and other debilitating "diseases" infecting the internet) all have the right altruistic intentions, but lack the ability to co-operate with others.

The majority of spam is now generated by botnets. A botnet is a large network of "slave" PCs that have been compromised by the installation of small programs that effectively give the perpetrators – mostly for fraudulent purposes, control over their PCs. These PCs are used without the knowledge of their owners, to carry out the nefarious work of the fraudsters, including the recruiting of other PCs to join the botnet. To most of us, this is a frightening scenario.

Business networks are perhaps not so guilty of being involved in the spread of such infections (although some are...), since most have (hopefully) efficient IT departments with security high on their agenda.

However, this is not the case with the average home user, who will most likely not be particularly IT literate and probably ignorant of their involvement in any botnet activities.

Microsoft has recently joined the ongoing war of words on the subject by suggesting that Internet Service Providers (ISPs) should take a more proactive stance in dealing with the problem.

They have suggested that ISPs should take a proactive approach to detect and quarantine those PCs that have been compromised in some way.

It has been suggested that in the case of human diseases, the reaction is to detect and quarantine those who are infected. Witness the recent situation with regard to Swine Flu, where air-travellers arriving at many airports were scanned for high-temperature and other symptoms, and quarantined if found to be sick.

In the world of technology, perhaps similar methodologies should be employed to limit, if not totally eradicate Internet infections. Technology exists that would enable ISPs to detect which PCs are generating spam and allow the ISP to disconnect those infected from the network until the user has cleansed their systems to avoid further spread of infection.

Any such actions would need to be complemented by advice and assistance to compromised system users on how to eradicate any infections prior to them being reconnected to the network. There would, of course, be a cost to this and it would not be unreasonable for a small surcharge being applied to users to help funding the process. After all, we all pay airport taxes that go towards implementing security measures at airports. What is the difference here? It is for the good of us all.

Unfortunately, the suggestion of placing such responsibilities on the ISPs is most likely to be rejected by them. They have thus far taken the view that they are just passive players, simply providing the connection of users to the Internet and that they should not be expected to take on the role of internet police. This has been the position taken by them during the recent pressures for them to police and take action against those involved in downloading pirated music, videos and other copyright material from the Internet.

In our view, the two scenarios are totally different. In one, the pressure is to help protect the pecuniary interests of commercial organisations, whereas the protection of the Internet itself from attack by fraudsters which is causing a significant impact on the performance of the Internet is more serious and is already affecting them and their customers.

As responsible consultants, May Day Consulting and its partner Facilitators International LLP, support any actions that will protect businesses and the integrity of their technology and data. We suggest that all businesses continuously review their security measures, including the constant updating of their Internet security facilities. It is no longer sufficient to install an anti-virus program, but "all-in-one" solutions are more appropriate – those that not only protect against infections by a virus or Trojan, but also against phishing, identity theft and include a firewall facility.

If you need assistance or advice, please call May Day Consulting on (01224) 697457.

We wish to acknowledge with thanks that some of the material contained within this publication has been sourced from Computer Weekly, PC Pro, BBC and other reputable sources..

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