

UnderstandIT

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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.

AN END TO SPAGETTI CABLING?

You may have seen this claim in the past, with the advent of Bluetooth technology. You may therefore be a little sceptical about a quick fix to such issues.

Bluetooth has been trumpeted as being the saviour for those of us who suffer from masses of cables connecting not only PCs and their peripheral devices (printers, disk drivers etc.) but also the humble home Hi-Fi or home theatre systems with speakers etc.

Unfortunately, although Bluetooth technology is now appearing in an increasing range of products, and the availability of compatible devices is growing, it is still not as ubiquitous as one would have expected.

Respite may now actually be on the way, following an announcement recently by OFCOM on the deregulation of certain radio frequencies. The result of this decision is to free part of the radio spectrum that can be used for very high speed data transmission over short distances – typically up to 30 metres. Use of the frequencies concerned will no longer require licencing.

The technology, being dubbed Ultra Wide-Band (UWB), will allow large amounts of data (media files etc.) at up to 2 gigabits (2 billion, million bits) per second, over a distance of up to 30 metres. It is anticipated though that it will more likely be used over much shorter distances to interconnect PCs and their peripherals, MP3 players and digital cameras etc. using wireless USB type connections. Such transmissions will be low-power, so will not produce interference between users. Technology companies are already developing devices that will utilise these wireless frequencies for sale in Japan and the US.

The move to de-regulate this particular part of the radio spectrum was prompted by the European negotiations on the subject of UWB technical standards.

UK BROADBAND INTERNET – POOR SERVICES AND HIGH PRICES

The development of broadband Internet access in the UK is currently under heavy criticism. Reports circulating within the industry both from users and providers, about the various methods of accessing the Internet in the UK does not make good reading.

The reliability, availability and cost of the various options for users who want to access the Internet using an “always on”, high-speed service do not compare favourably with other countries in Europe and elsewhere.

Fixed line broadband services – these services are provided via a physical connection into your office or home but are not delivering what the majority of customers expect. The marketing hype put out by the major providers is at best misleading and at worst misrepresentation.

Many users report that they have responded to marketing hype and opted for the higher-speed ADSL Max services. ADSL Max theoretically provides “up to 8 megabits” of bandwidth, which on the face of it sounds very good. However, in practice, disgruntled users report that they are only achieving transmission speeds as low as 400+ Kilobits downloading and 300k+ uploading. They have quickly learned that “up to 8 Megabits” really only means 200 kilobits to 7.6 megabits, and providers fall back on the “up to” specification when a user complains!

Service providers readily admit that the introduction of ADSL Max has heightened users’ expectations, and the infrastructure in place cannot cope with the unprecedented demand. This is particularly acute at peak times when more people are trying to access the Internet, causing contention within the network and reducing the effective speed of most users’ services.

If you are experiencing what you feel are slower transmission speeds than you were expecting or are paying for, then you can check the effective rate by visiting the BT ADSL checking service web site at:

www.adslchecker.bt.com/pls/adsl/adslchecker.welcome

However, beware - the information provided by this service should be taken with a large pinch of salt.

On the plus side however, if you are committing to BT’s ADSL Max service, they will install the service and analyse the actual transmission speeds that you are achieving over an initial 10 day period. The actual achievable speed will then be set (and presumably this will determine how much you pay!).

Mobile Broadband – this is one of the services provided by the new 3G cellular radio networks that operators paid handsomely for licences to operate. They typically allow you to access the Internet from your smart mobile phone, PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) or hand-held computer via the 3G networks.

Users of these devices are currently faced with what can only be described as rip-off prices for accessing the Internet. This may be the reason why only a very small minority of the many millions of mobile phones in the UK have actually been used for this purpose.

Many users are reporting that to use these mobile broadband services in an ad hoc fashion can be horrendously expensive. Figures of less than a penny per Kilobyte of information are typically quoted by network providers. What many do not realise is that even at a quoted rate of say .73pence per kilobyte of information, this can equate to around £10 to download and view a 1.5 Megabyte video clip!

The recommendation is to sign up for a subscription pack that many operators are now offering. This does reduce the cost a little, but the bottom line is that the cost of browsing the web or downloading email onto your mobile phone can hurt your wallet whilst the network providers recover their hefty investment in the 3G network infrastructure.

Finally – *Wireless (Wi-Fi) hotspots*. These services were originally touted as the solution to computing on the move.

In many other countries, particularly in Asia, public hotspots are ubiquitous and provided free by cafes, restaurants and hotels, where the cost of providing the service is much lower and therefore the service is an excellent attraction for patrons of these outlets.

However, in the UK, there are almost no free services, and browsing the Internet on your laptop in a hotel or coffee bar can set you back around £6 per hour as a minimum charge. Many users complain that when paying £200 per night for a hotel room, broadband Wi-Fi services should be included for free.

Airport users are perhaps worst affected, since many are a captive audience, sometimes with hours to kill between flights.

WINDOWS VISTA – SERVICE PACK 1 UPDATE

As indicated in last month's edition of Understand IT, Microsoft has just released a beta preview Service Pack for Windows Vista. However, they have stated that the service pack is not expected to be released in its final form until early 2008.

Meantime it has been report that many businesses are not rushing to upgrade to the new operating system. As in previous incarnations of Windows, business, principally large ones are very reluctant to upgrade, not only because of the tremendous cost involved in licensing, manpower to handle the upgrade but also increased support costs.

Most businesses prefer to wait until the operating system has under-gone the implementation of its first service pack and is deemed to be more mature and stable.

WINDOWS VISTA – EASIER AND MORE EXTENSIVE FILE NAVIGATION

This is the next in the series of articles on Windows Vista.

The use of My Computer, or Windows Explorer in earlier versions of Windows was easy and to a great extent, customisable. In Windows Vista however, there are further customisation options available that make managing and searching for files even easier.

In Windows XP for example, when using Windows Explorer to organise files (in order, for example, to copy or move them to another folder or drive), you could select files in a number of ways:

- Individually (one file at a time)
- A number of contiguous files - by clicking on the first file in a list to highlight it, then holding the shift key, and selecting the last file in the list that you wish to highlight and every file between the two is automatically selected.
- A number of non-contiguous files – by holding the CTRL key and then repeatedly selecting the individual files that you need.

You can then carry out whatever action you intend on the files that you have selected.

The problem was however, it was quite easy to de-select the files that you had painstakingly selected, resulting in you having to repeat the process.

In Windows Vista, all these features are also available. However, you have a further option to help, at least visually, to manipulate any number of files. You can now opt to display a ticked selection box that appears to the left of any file that you select.

When you then take action using “drag and drop”, a small window appears over the mouse cursor telling you exactly what is going to happen – whether you are moving or copying the selected files, together with an indication of the folder to which they will be copied or moved. Releasing the mouse button then causes the action to take place. With Windows XP, it was notorious for moving or copying selected files to the wrong folder if you were not precise with your mouse cursor when hovering over the target folder.

The same criteria apply in Vista as it did with XP – the default action when dragging and dropping files is MOVE if they are being dropped onto a folder within the same physical disk drive, and COPY if the files are dropped on a folder in a different physical disk drive. These actions can of course be reversed by holding the SHIFT key to change COPY to MOVE and CONTROL key to change MOVE to COPY.

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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