

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.

GOOGLE'S "CHROME" BROWSER AND ONLINE APPLICATIONS

By the time you read this, Google will have launched its own, new Internet browser application, albeit in beta form – called Google Chrome.

Google Chrome is scheduled to be launched in 100 countries on September 2, 2008 and will compete directly with Microsoft's Internet Explorer, and Mozilla Firefox. Google claims that Chrome will offer significant improvements in speed, and claims to handle tabs (multiple web pages open simultaneously) more intelligently and should avoid the browser crashing. It is an "open source" application – in other words, the source code is openly available and anyone wishing to make improvements or add-on features can do so. This is similar to Mozilla's Firefox, which has benefited from a greater level of end-user involvement in its development. This has resulted in its success in taking significant market-share from Internet Explorer over the past couple of years.

Google will only be offering a Windows version of the new browser initially, but versions for Apple Mac and Linux will follow.

This new browser is in line with Google's strategy to develop a comprehensive set of integrated online applications, which it sees as the strategic way forward for delivering services to PC users. This strategy is in contrast to Microsoft, who has historically developed "offline" applications (programs that run locally on each PC and attract a sometimes hefty licence fee).

Google's approach is to offer applications that reside on the Internet and can be used only online. The steady growth of broadband and ever higher bandwidth at an affordable cost now makes this a possibility. They already offer Google Docs, which is a suite of applications very similar to MS Office.

The advantages of this approach is that no software resides on the user's PC, and documents created, whilst they can be downloaded and stored locally, are more usually stored online in the user's own secure storage area. Other advantages are obvious:

- Less strain on your PC's memory and hard disk capacity
- Better security
- The ability to distribute or share documents online with other, authorised users
- Mobility – the ability to access your documents from anywhere in the world.

The concept of having a "thin" client – in layman's terms, very little software running on networked PCs but using applications residing on a central server – is not new.

Many organisations are already using this concept internally within their organisations to streamline the upgrading of software, which resides centrally on their network server(s). This can significantly reduce the cost of supporting networked PCs and the required power of their PC inventory.

The Google approach takes this and expands it to provide the same advantages, but over the Internet.

Microsoft too is looking in a similar direction for the future. It is currently looking at the nature of computing beyond the Windows operating system, since it recognises that Vista will be the last in the long line of PC-based operating systems. Its replacement is likely to be web-based with less software running on the PC.

If you would like to know more about Google "Chrome", the advantages of "thin client" computing or using the Google applications, then please contact Alan Finch on 01224 697457 as soon as possible.

THE SURVEILLANCE STATE - A STEP NEARER?

Much to the consternation of many, the government has just published details of radical plans to develop a centralised surveillance system to track in real-time every kind of electronic activity undertaken by us all.

Among the principal reasons for such wide-ranging plans is to help combat terrorism activity and child protection. However, it also plans to permit others, including Health Authorities, Government departments and local councils to access the data collected.

The plans do not actually call for the recording of the content of phone calls or emails, but rather details of who called whom or who emailed whom with dates and times. Details of IP addresses and web sites browsed will also be included.

The idea is a major escalation in the government's powers with regard to electronic surveillance. It is raising many eyebrows in the IT industry since the task is likely to be horrendously expensive and call for the development and installation of vast amounts of hardware and software technology across the country, much of which does not actually exist at the moment.

Similarly, those citizens supporting civil rights and privacy campaigners envisage institutionalised snooping on every member of the population in the UK. They are already citing the alleged mis-use of information gained under the existing RIPA (Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act) by local councils for purposes for which the legislation was never intended. The proposed level of intrusion into peoples' lives will be unparalleled if the plans are developed and implemented.

On a technical level, the potential requirements of such a huge database are also staggering to comprehend. The requirement to record details of every telephone call, mobile call, email, instant message and web site browsed is likely to produce billions of records every day!

Retrieval of information from such a large repository of information in a timely fashion (in order to trace and track a potential terrorist and take immediate avoiding action, for example) is also likely to be but one of a whole raft of major obstacles to be overcome.

One saving grace is that the government's record in specifying, contracting, developing and implementing major national IT systems has been disastrous in recent years. One can only hope that this idea never actually sees the light of day or everyone's privacy will be lost and the Data Protection Act would need to be repealed!

INTERNET ADDICTION

Do you feel confused and somewhat stressed when your broadband Internet connection is out of service or not available for some other reason?

If so, then you are not alone. A recent study by the Yougov research and consulting agency concluded from one of its user surveys that as many as 44% of users experienced some level of stress when they could not access the Internet.

The study suggested that the growing penetration of "always on" broadband connectivity to the Internet is producing a culture of instant answers to almost any question or issue that might arise in daily life. When that access is unavailable, there is often a deep feeling of stress.

The same study revealed that 19% of users spend more time in a week browsing the Internet than with their families.

Perhaps many of us who do rely, perhaps too much, on the Internet for research, general knowledge and entertainment are becoming addicted! Do you recognise this feeling?

NEW WIFI STANDARD COMPLETED

The Institute of Electrical & Electrical Engineers (IEEE) has now completed drafting the latest standard for WiFi systems. The new standard (known as 802.11r) is designed specifically to support VOIP (Voice Over IP).

The current WiFi standards (802.11 g and n) were originally designed to provide for access via one wireless access point and they accomplish this well. However, the existing standard does not work well when using voice, particularly when moving from one access point to another where a delay is incurred.

However, WiFi capability is now being built into many mobile devices, including mobile phones and the use of VOIP is very common. The delay involved with the current standard when moving between access points causes any voice call in progress to be disconnected. The new standard addresses this problem.

Unfortunately, these new standards take a considerable amount of time to be agreed and ratified internationally – typically 4 years. However, the new standard when incorporated into new generations of access points and mobile devices will resolve any current problems.

SKYPE SUBSCRIPTIONS

Many of you will by now be familiar with Skype, the VOIP (Voice Over IP) service. Skype allows you to make calls to other PC-based Skype users for free and to off-network conventional telephone lines at a very small nominal charge (for this, you have to buy small amounts of credit in advance).

Skype has now introduced two subscription services that offer unlimited calls:

Unlimited Country* – £2.95 + VAT per month
Unlimited World** – £6.95 + VAT per month

With these subscription packages, you can make unlimited calls to other Skype users or conventional off-network landlines for the monthly charges shown.

* When you subscribe to Unlimited Country, you need to specify which country you wish to make calls to.

** With Unlimited World package, you can make unlimited calls to any number in any one of 36 countries.

NB: Under the Skype fair-use policy, "Unlimited" means up to 10,000 minutes per month, which equates to 176 hours or 7 days! Go here for more information:

<http://www.skype.com/intl/en-gb/allfeatures/subscriptions/>

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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