

IT Corner - The UK Perspective – April 2005

I'm Back

So many of you probably thought that I was gone but, guess what, I'm back and still here to talk about various IT (ICT) issues that may be of interest to volunteers in The Gambia. I would encourage all volunteers with IT questions to contact me and I will do my best to assist "from afar".

After a few months getting myself back together I am now living and working in Cambridge. IT work here is so much different than in The Gambia but perhaps not as challenging...I miss the people in The Gambia and the work but I hope that I can still be with you all "in spirit".

E-Mail Etiquette

A lot of people regularly send e-mail not really thinking about what they are doing or about the person on the other end. A few cases in point...

- **Large Attachments** - Attaching a file to an e-mail is a great way to get it to someone but be careful that it is not too large! Consider that some free e-mail services have, in the past, put severe limitations on the size of any e-mail that can be stored there. So, if you sent a person with an account with a limitations of 1 Mb a file that was bigger they would never get it or, if it was just a bit smaller than 1 Mb then you would fill their e-mail account! Also, consider the person at the other end. If they use a modem to read their e-mail then a 1 Mb attachment can take as many as 15 minutes to receive!
- **Respond!** - Nothing is more irritating then sending a message to someone only to have them reply after two weeks! Did they receive the message? Are they ignoring you? Do they like you? (The last one being a particular concern of mine... *SNIFF*) If you receive an e-mail that is asking you for something but you cannot reply immediately reply anyway to tell the other person to wait which lets the other person know that the message was not lost somewhere...
- **Signatures** - Adding a "signature" to your e-mail is a good thing as it gives people a bit more information about you should they need it. A signature is a bit of text that appears at the bottom of every e-mail you send. Mine, for example, has my e-mail address and web-site address. It is sort of like "electronic stationary".

News from the UK

A quick run-down of some of the things happening with IT here in the UK:

- **High-Speed Internet** - The competition for providing "broadband" internet (fast Internet) is really heating up with rates getting extremely reasonable and speeds getting faster and faster. Consider that I have the "low-end" offering from NTL (the cable company) which is 2 Mbps which is about 36 times faster than the highest speed modem you can get! In The Gambia the connection to the Internet is provided by two connections one to a satellite (then Canada) which is about 1 Mbps and another to Senegal which is about 4 Mbps. My connection at home in the UK is about 40% the total capacity available in The Gambia!
- **Ipods** - Ipods, Ipods everywhere! If you have not talked to Geri and Maurice about theirs (which they often use at parties), an iPod is a device that allows you to store MANY CDs on a box smaller than a packet of cigarettes. The latest models allow you to store more than 10,000 CDs! I would have thought this would be an ideal device to take to The Gambia instead of packing all those CDs...Here the tell-tale white ear-pieces are visible everywhere with people in their own little world listening to their iPod. Ok, they are NOT cheap (cheapest is about £60, most expensive about £350) but they are certainly a fashion statement...The portable digital video player has not really caught on yet.
- **Wireless Internet Access** - Well, they seem to be everywhere. If you have a laptop with a wireless network card you can get Internet access in many public places now (for a price) without any cables! Most airports and many train stations now provide such access. This is the way technology should be: Simple and easy to use.

- **NPfIT - The National Program for IT in the NHS** - The multi-year project that promises to "computerize" the NHS seems to be hitting a number of snags including accusations of the government not talking to the health practitioners (no!) and being over-ambitious (no again!). It is refreshing to see that IT projects have problems here as well!

News

- The NICI Policy for the Gambia was recently reviewed at a validation workshop held at the Kairaba on the 13th of April which promises to bring various IT project funding to the country. I am not convinced that more money is the answer...
- Philip Bell is back in The Gambia doing a bit of work (on private contract) with the Department of State for Education on the same system he worked on when he was a VSO volunteer..EMIS. I am personally anxious to see what happens with this over the next few years. I will not be the only one crossing my fingers I am sure. Be sure to welcome him should you see him.
- The "Steve Rice Computer Fix-It Service - Cambridge Branch" is now open for business and operates at the cost of one meal per problem fixed (cost negotiable). Reasonable terms for volunteers in The Gambia (credit available).
- Steve Rice has no immediate plans to return to The Gambia.

As per normal, let me know if there are any topics you would like me to discuss/address in future columns.

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