IT Corner – August 2004

Windows XP Updates

The second "service pack" for Windows XP has just been released and it would be a good idea if you use Windows XP to get it and install it.

What is a service pack?

This is a series of fixes to the operating system including security modifications (in this case). It is provided free from Microsoft and it is highly recommended you get it. There have been a lot of criticisms about this service pack but it would be a serious mistake not to install it.

Are there any risks involved?

There IS the slight risk it could cause your machine not to be able to start correctly so it is recommended that you make a back-up any critical documents (you do that regularly anyway, don't you?) before installing and you might also want to get your original XP installation CDs (you have those, don't you?) in case you need to re-install XP. Even if the worse happens it is unlikely that you will lose everything on your computer (reinstalling the operating system normally does not erase what is already installed on the hard disk other than the operating system itself).

Ok, how do I get it?

Well, you can go to the main Microsoft web site (http://www.microsoft.com) and follow the appropriate links or use the "Windows Update" feature which should automatically add it to the list of "critical updates" you need to download. Another option is to ask me nicely as I should (by the time you read this) have been able to download it and put it on CD (and at 80 Mb or more when using Windows Update will take a LONG time to download...).

Windows Update?

Funny you should ask…

Updating Microsoft Windows

While we are on the subject, if you are using Microsoft Windows it is HIGHLY recommended when you are connected to the Internet that you periodically go to the Microsoft "Windows Update" web site (http://windowsupdate.microsoft.com) to see if there are any fixes/updates for your system (in Internet Explorer this is also under the tools menu called, you guessed it, "Windows Update" or in some versions of Windows it is right on the "Start" menu). This is a free service whose only cost to you is the amount of time you need to spend downloading the updates to your computer.

Why?

Regularly updating your operating system with the latest updates is highly recommended in order to (attempt to) ensure you are safe from the newest threats from the Internet. Obviously, this would be in conjunction with anti-virus software (you have that installed of course, don't you?).

Interesting, there are similar "web update" facilities for Microsoft Office and software packages as well (including some Linux-based software).

Protecting Your Computer

In recent months there have been several serious viruses released on the Internet so I thought I might give you a bit of an idea how to protect your computer from these threats. All of the software I mention can be downloaded from the web sites indicated but if you ask I can also give you a copy.

Anti-Virus Software

There is really no excuse not to have any anti-virus software installed on your computer. A number of companies distribute low-cost solutions to your anti-virus needs but there are also some NO COST versions that you may want to check out:

- Avast Home Edition (available from http://www.avast.com)
- Grisoft AVG Free Edition (available from http://www.grisoft.com)

Both of these packages require that you register on their web site (it is free, of course) and that you do NOT use it for commercial purposes (strictly speaking, installing it on a computer at work is a no-no).

Note: Anti-virus software is reviewed (including the two free packages mentioned above) in the latest Personal Computer World (UK) magazine (September 2004) which awarded AVG a "Highly Commended" accolade. If you would like to see this article, just let me know and I can let you borrow it.

"Ad Ware" and "Spy Ware"

There are not only viruses to contend with in these days of computers connected to the Internet there are also the threats posed by "Ad Ware" and "Spy Ware". "Ad Ware" is a computer program installed perhaps along with another program and not with your explicit consent that prompts you to spend money either by popping up messages all the time or forcing you to view particular web pages. "Spy Ware" is a computer program (or facility) that monitors what you are doing on your computer for whatever purposes it requires (perhaps, if it is a web site, this is to remember who you are and what you were doing when you used the web site). These types of computer programs often slow your computer down and are often a real nuisance. Luckily there are a number of free computer programs out there that will clean up your computer. The one I use and seems to be the most popular is the program "Spybot - Search and Destroy" (available from http://www.spybot.info). Spybot works much like an anti-virus program and will also, on request, update itself with the latest information regarding "Ad Ware"/"Spy Ware" threats from the Internet.

Running these programs is certainly an eye-opener as it scans your system and finds a lot programs that you were not even aware of. It is highly recommended you get a copy of this software and update/run it often.

Firewall Software

If you ever connect to the Internet it is probably a good idea to install some sort of "firewall" on your computer. A firewall is a program that monitors all of the activity between yourself and the network you are connecting to (the "Internet" in this case) to catch any possible attacks on your computer (such as a "Denial of Service" attack where your computer is bombarded with massive amounts of computer data in order to cause it to stop working). Again, there are a few free software programs available that will provide firewall services the one I use is called "Sygate Personal Firewall" (SPF) (available from http://www.sygate.com) though ZoneAlarm (available from http://www.zonelabs.com) is another program that many also use (which is also available in a free version). I should point out that with firewall software, once installed, you will most likely have to go through a short period of "learning" as the firewall asks you about any network activity it finds along the lines of "Do you want to allow Outlook Express to use the Internet?" Luckily you can have the program remember your responses so it doesn't keep asking if you want to allow Internet Explorer to use the Internet all the time…

Fast Internet in The Gambia

Well, recently there has been a bit of a scramble as companies and various agencies (such as the VSO offices) seek to update their Internet access so it is a bit quicker than a normal computer modem (maximum speed 56 Kbps). If you are interested in this, there are a few options here in The Gambia (generally, there are other options):

- **ISDN** - This offering by Gamtel is basically a digital phone line providing pretty much a guaranteed 56 Kbps connection. Now, you might think this is not much better than a standard modem you can buy anywhere that indicates it communicates at 56 Kbps as well, however, using the digital line of ISDN means that you have a "cleaner" connection to the Internet. Using a normal telephone line your modem has to communicate over typically "noisy" lines here in The Gambia which slows the speed down to much less than the theoretical maximum of 56 Kbps.
- **Dedicated Phone Line** - Another offering by Gamtel this is not for the faint-hearted as it is VERY expensive. This is the option that VSO has chosen for it's Internet access. It essentially involves dedicating a telephone line (both at your site and at Gamtel itself) for Internet access and using special equipment to provide higher speed access.
- **Wireless Internet** - This option is being provided by a number of different groups including Netpage Solutions. Basically it is a wireless receiver that communicates to the Internet provider to provide Internet access so is not limited by telephone cable restrictions. There are a few drawbacks: cost (it is expensive) and that it is only really offered right now in the Kombos.

For all of these options you will require specific computer equipment in order to use it. Typically this equipment is available from the provider…at a cost, of course. Of course, most of these options can also be shared with multiple computers (assuming you have a network installed) which means that the cost is not quite so bad if you consider the cost per computer…

Of course, the options in the UK are MUCH more diverse (and much quicker) than these, but I don't think the options above are too bad for West Africa…

News

- If you are in the market for various non-functional (though, perhaps, fixable) bits of computer just let me know! Free to a good home though you would have to come pick it up…
- The civil service "ICT Cadre" has been approved and can now be used. For more information either contact me or the Department of State for Communication, Information and Technology (DoSCIT)
- There is a group working on a national ICT policy for The Gambia, if you are interested, check out their web site at http://www.dosh.gm/gambia-ictpolicy   This policy is NOT specific to the civil service but also includes private enterprise and future plans.
- Looking for payroll software? Contact me, I have just completed some software for use RVTH that you may be able to use…no cost, of course, and written using Microsoft Access to attempt to minimise any support costs and make changes a bit easier…
- As normal the "Steve Rice Computer Fix-It Service" operates at the cost of one meal per problem fixed (cost negotiable)

As per normal, let me know if there bare any topics you would like me to discuss/address in this column.

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