

Lucky 7 - Has Windows 7 got your number?

Last month saw the release of Microsoft's latest version of its Windows operating system, Windows 7. Terry Lynch from appiChar gives it a test drive while alternative OS advocates Paula Graham of Fossbox and Miles Maier at Lasa look at new versions of Ubuntu and Mac OS X operating systems.

What is Windows 7?

After almost three years on the market, Windows Vista is being replaced by Windows 7 as the newest operating system in Microsoft's desktop line-up. Whilst it's no secret that Vista wasn't quite the success Microsoft were hoping for, Windows 7 is being seen as Microsoft delivering a secure, fast and compatible operating system.



about it – Ed). It ran all required company programs and was compatible with existing equipment like printers, scanners and webcams so why should they risk upgrading to a new, untested operating system? After two service-pack updates and with hardware companies updating their software to work with Vista, things are now much smoother with fewer compatibility issues when upgrading.

Windows 7 uses the same secure environment as

Vista so all drivers and programs which run on Vista will run on Windows 7 without issues. It also brings new features focused on security, speed and ease of use which could offer big improvements in the way you use your computer. You can compare the features of the different versions over at <http://bit.ly/3SxwIZ>

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Why Upgrade?

A large number of organisations avoided upgrading to Windows Vista as they saw Windows XP as "good enough" (or just heard horror stories

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Contribute

Disagree with an article?

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Know of an initiative we should mention?

We welcome all feedback about *Computanews* so if we've missed something out send us your thoughts or news, or submit an article for inclusion in a future issue.

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is produced by Lasa

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<http://ictchampion.lasa.org.uk>

Lasa has been providing the voluntary and community sector with high quality and impartial ICT advice since 1984.



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newsbits

Lasa launches ICT funding policy paper

Lasa has launched a new policy paper as part of its campaign for ICT to be recognised as a legitimate cost of providing a service by funders and policy-makers. Lasa also called for funders to support circuit riders (or mobile ICT support workers) to provide on the ground strategic support to help VCOs better use ICT in their work with communities.

Download the pdf:

<http://ictchampion.lasa.org.uk>

Relaunch for helplines charity

Telephone Helplines Association (THA), the umbrella charity which supports non-profit helplines and enables free calls to charity helplines from mobiles, have relaunched with a new name. The Helplines Association reflects the growing need for helplines to offer services through additional communication methods such as email, SMS and instant messaging.

Find out more: www.helplines.org.uk

BT Community Connections

If you volunteer with a community group or charitable organisation, you can apply for a laptop and contribution to a year's free broadband connection. Postal applications must be received by 5 January 2010 and online by 7 January.

Find out more:

www.btcommunityconnections.com

Say it Louder

Louder is a new online home for campaigners. This free and accessible site draws together a range of social media tools for people who want to change the world. Through Louder you will be able to create a microsite for your campaign with the most used 'change-tools' the web has to offer. To help make your campaign louder you

will be able to connect up with other campaigns and those running them.

Sign up at: www.louder.org.uk

Lasa ICT Learning Programme

Applications are open for this new innovative programme which will help circuit riders, development workers and accidental techies develop their awareness of the sector and its ICT needs, consultancy, planning and non-technical skills.

More information and application forms:

www.lasa.org.uk/ict/circuit-rider-development

Find a funding partner

NCVO's Funding Central site will now allow you to search for potential organisations to collaborate with. All you need to do is create a public profile outlining what you do plus your experience and expertise that others can benefit from. In the Find a Partner area, you can search for organisations that are looking for potential partners to work with on a project or who are looking to put in joint bids for funding opportunities.

Find out more:

www.fundingcentral.org.uk

Women's Resource Centre's Journey into Social Media

By now almost everyone has heard about blogging, and other social media tools such as twitter and Facebook. But how are these tools actually being used by non profits to communicate and engage with their audiences? In a new Knowledgebase article, Leah Williams shows how social media tools have benefitted the Women's Resource Centre.

www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/wrcsocialmediajourney

Computanews now accepts advertisements

If you offer a technology product, service or event aimed specifically at the voluntary sector you can draw attention to it through the pages of **Computanews**.

Computanews is a specialised magazine covering the use of technology within the voluntary sector. It has a key audience of:

- organisation managers and trustees
- staff responsible for their own organisation's IT
- Circuit Riders who provide advice and technology support to other organisations

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To discuss further: 0845 456 3970 | info@appichar.co.uk
www.appichar.co.uk

ICT Events

12 November (London) and
1 December (Liverpool):
Using ICT to Support
People with Dyslexia

Call free on 0800 269545 or
book online: www.abilitynet.org.uk/athome_course_ict

16 November (Liverpool)
and 18 November
(London): Web 2.0

AbilityNet demonstrate how
to make the most of web 2.0
to communicate and
collaborate.

Call free on 0800 269545 or
book online www.abilitynet.org.uk/atwork_course_web2

17 November: info 3.0
Introduction to Social
Media @ NCVO, London N1

Find out more:
<http://bit.ly/4tXnle>

01 December: Netsquared
Net Tuesday

Discussion on e-campaigning
and sharing. Sign up at [http://
netsquared.meetup.com/31](http://netsquared.meetup.com/31)

4 December: SpiceWorld
London @ Roxy Bar and
Screen, London SE1

Get more from the free
SpiceWorks helpdesk tool.
[www.spiceworld2009.com/
london](http://www.spiceworld2009.com/london)

8 December: NCVO ICT
Foresight Seminar @
NCVO, London, N1

What's round the corner in
the world of technology?
<http://bit.ly/1Yqj7c>

Tips 154 ICT Security

Lasa's latest Computanews Guide -
ICT Security - is aimed at
voluntary sector staff with
responsibility for managing and
securing ICT systems. We give
our top tips from the Guide on
securing those all-important assets.



1. Develop a Backup Strategy, back up your important files regularly, check you can restore them, and store a copy of your backups off site
2. Install antivirus software and ensure it's set to update daily
3. Make sure you regularly download security updates for your computer's operating system (e.g. Windows, Mac OSX or Linux) and other software. This can usually be set to happen automatically
4. Install a firewall to protect your computers and network from malicious attacks.
5. If you have a wireless network make sure you enable WPA security (Wi-Fi Protected Access) if possible, or WEP (Wired Equivalent Privacy) if not
6. Don't respond to "spam" (unsolicited emails). Many spam messages contain viruses or contain links to (very convincing) fake websites that try to steal sensitive personal information like credit card details
7. Make sure staff and volunteers are aware of the issues and receive appropriate training and induction to your ICT systems
8. Develop an ICT Acceptable Use Policy. This will make it clear to everyone in the organisation what they should and shouldn't be doing to use ICT responsibly and securely
9. Choose and use secure passwords on computers and networks, and change them regularly to prevent unauthorised access to your data
10. Store your ICT equipment securely (especially portable items such as laptops, cameras etc.) - don't forget to lock up!
11. Security-mark your equipment - you might stand a chance of getting it back in the event of theft
12. Get insurance! Make sure you have adequate cover for replacing your equipment should the need arise

Download the ICT Security Guide from:
www.lasa.org.uk/publications/computanews-guides/



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End-User Control of Installing Desktop Applications - AppLocker

Managing users' access to their machine can be rather difficult. On the one hand, restricting their access prevents them from installing programs which can not only distract from work but can sometimes contain viruses, Trojans and other malicious software. On the other hand, this stops them from installing programs they may genuinely need.

AppLocker is a new feature which allows administrators to designate a list of allowed applications for client machines. The benefits of this allow administrators to create rules which will allow users to install Adobe Reader, for example, when a new version is released.

Remote Data Access - BranchCache

For organisations having branch

offices, managing data storage and network traffic across slow site links can cause serious problems. For those organisations with a central office where all the servers and data are stored there is the problem that each time a user in a branch office accesses a shared file, they need to retrieve the file from the head office server and save it back there when changes are made.

Windows 7 introduces a new feature called BranchCache which reduces site link traffic and speeds up file access for users in branch offices. When a user in a branch office accesses a file from the head office, the file is downloaded to their machine and stored in a "BranchCache" on their machine. Any subsequent users in the same branch office who try to access the file will, instead of re-downloading the file from the head office, download the copy from the machine which accessed it previously. This saves on network speed across site links which can be slow but also keeps

the documents up to date and replicates any changes made in other branch offices.

Problem Solving Assistance - Problem Steps Recorder

One of the first things an IT person will ask you to do when you call in for help is to recreate the problem for them to see. Whether it's an error message which pops up when Outlook opens or the company intranet not loading properly, it helps if we see what steps happen to create the problem so we can then try to pinpoint the cause.

Windows 7 has a new program called The Problem Steps Recorder which allows users to record how to make the problem occur and save the steps as a small file which can then be emailed to the helpdesk. This file contains screenshots of the windows, where the mouse is clicked and any error messages which appear allowing IT support to begin resolving the problem before they even call the user back.

Speed – Nearly up to XP Levels

Thankfully Microsoft has managed to make Windows 7 run faster than Vista. In speed tests on the same hardware, Windows XP comes out top, Windows 7 slightly behind and Vista coming in slowest. Considering that Windows 7 is much more secure and modern than XP, having it almost match the speed of XP which was developed to run on machines a decade ago is not something to be taken lightly. This also means that Windows 7 will run quite happily on any

Which edition?

There are 5 editions of Windows 7 – Starter (for netbooks), Home Premium, Professional, Ultimate and Enterprise. In addition there are 32 and 64 bit versions, just to make it a little more confusing (see <http://windows.microsoft.com/en-GB/windows7/products/features/64-bit-support> for an explanation). Many smaller VCS organisations will probably go for either the Professional or Enterprise versions (these are being offered as upgrades through CTX's Microsoft donation programme www.ctxchange.org.uk). As with XP and Vista, the home version will not connect to a network domain (if you have a server running your network then you will have a domain environment) and should be avoided. There's a good overview of the features which are available in the different editions at www.winsupersite.com/win7/win7_skus_compare.asp

machines which were Vista compatible. Obviously, the faster the machine is the better experience you will have, but Windows 7's recommended minimum specs of 1GB memory and 1 GHz processor deliver performance which anyone would be comfortable with.

Improved Interface

The taskbar in Windows has stayed the same since its initial release with Windows '95. Vista gave it a see-through makeover but it still behaved the same way with programs, the notification area by the clock and the Quick Launch area with shortcuts to common programs.

Windows 7 introduces a new style taskbar which combines the Quick Launch shortcuts with running programs allowing you to quickly launch programs and common tasks using 'Jump Lists'. Programs are automatically grouped together, showing all open windows by hovering over the icon in the taskbar which keeps the interface clean and windows easily accessible.

Aero, the glass style user interface first introduced in Vista has also had a few changes, you can now snap windows to the top or sides of your display and they will automatically maximise to fill the screen or half the screen allowing you to easily compare two folders or files.

'BitLocker to Go' – Mobile Data Security

Almost everyone will have heard about someone who has lost important data on a USB or laptop. Data is everywhere, and the ease of losing a drive the size of a pack of chewing gum containing confidential documents is something all organisations should be concerned about.

With Vista, Microsoft introduced a new technology called BitLocker which encrypts the entire contents of the hard drive within your laptop or desktop machine. This made it impossible for anyone to read the information on the drive by simply removing it and plugging it into another machine.

In Windows 7, but only available on the Ultimate and Enterprise versions, Microsoft has extended the capability of BitLocker by enabling it to encrypt USB drives using 'BitLocker to Go'. Any drive



SLIGHT DRAWBACK OF WINDOWS SYSTEM

encrypted with BitLocker to Go will only be readable once a password is given. If you always use the same USB drive on your computer you can tell Windows to remember the password so it won't bother you again for that machine.

Should we rush out and buy it, then?

As with anything on the network, it is always good practice to thoroughly test compatibility with any programs or hardware. Although initial testing of Windows 7 has shown it to be compatible with most existing networks, there will undoubtedly be teething problems. Windows XP will continue to be available as an option into 2011 which gives organisations plenty of time to transition over.

About the author

Terry Lynch (appiChar Australia Pty Ltd.) is an experienced IT consultant specialising in Microsoft-based networks. He is an MCSE and is responsible for designing and managing the networks for appiChar Australia's customers.

This is a slightly abbreviated version of appiChar's Windows 7 White Paper available at: <http://bit.ly/25S2bX>

Ubuntu 9 Linux for Human Beings

In the midst of the Windows 7 hype, the open source Ubuntu operating system is quietly moving towards the release of version 9.10, Karmic Koala. Why no fanfare for its slick new release? Because Ubuntu is nurtured by a community-led Foundation which doesn't have a publicity budget. Paula Graham starts from the beginning....

Don't laugh at my d-dinner
suit - I'm a serious
comp-p-petitor!



Ubuntu is a Bantu word which expressed the African National Congress's values during the struggle against apartheid. It's also a Linux-based operating system (OS) founded by a South African dot.com entrepreneur who decided to give something back to the world. This translates into three simple values for the OS:

- anyone can distribute and use Ubuntu without license fees
- everyone should be able to use it in their own language
- disability should not be a barrier

Environmentally, Ubuntu actively supports low-cost, low-power hardware alternatives. These are values it seems easy to get behind.

So is this about good hearts or good software?

We really don't have to choose between ethics and utility. Ubuntu is becoming a serious competitor

on its own merits. Linux is on 60% of the world's servers (a figure even acknowledged by Microsoft's CEO Steve Ballmer) and this year Ubuntu Server has overtaken Red Hat as the leading Linux server OS. Whilst Linux's desktop share is a tiny 1-2%, both Mac and Windows' markets are steadily declining but Ubuntu's jumped 12% on the release of version 9.04 earlier this year - even the most conservative estimates indicate a 60% growth in Linux desktop users since 2008.

Why should we care?

Because market share motivates software and hardware giants to support Linux properly. Thus, even the 'awkward squad' such as Canon and ATI now offer some Linux driver support whilst the likes of Google and Adobe are platform-agnostic. In the Linux-friendly camp, manufacturers such as Intel and HP have already achieved full Ubuntu integration.

Building on success

Ubuntu 9 certainly makes the most of these opportunities. The Desktop is fast, gorgeous, and well-organised. Any competent PC user can install the desktop or server with out of the box security, automatic updates and remote access. Most PC/laptop hardware is set up during installation and plug and play means just that - plug in a mainstream USB peripheral and Ubuntu will notify it ready to use in seconds. For other kit, it's as simple as choosing the make and model from a drop-down menu, with no prowling the internet for errant drivers, no remembering whether to insert the gizmo or the CD first, and no endless rebooting. Ubuntu's configuration wizards are easy to use and come with free tutorials, documentation and forums to get you started. All that's missing are the licensing headaches.

A CNet reviewer found Ubuntu 9.04 as slick as Windows 7, Mac

OS X (<http://news.cnet.com/ubuntu-9.04-as-slick-as-windows-7-mac-os-x/>) – and 9.10 promises to be even smarter. There’s loads of quality software and legacy import plug-ins are making migration to Ubuntu easier. Ubuntu really has arrived and the more we use it, the better it gets!

To download Ubuntu visit www.ubuntu.com You can even try Ubuntu before installation by running it from the CD you create from the download.

About the author

Paula Graham runs Fossbox, a

sustainable IT consultancy based in East London, and has been advocating Free Software, sustainable IT, and equal representation for women in ICT for the past decade.

Email: info@fossbox.org.uk

Web: www.fossbox.org.uk

Operating system accessibility compared....

	Windows 7	Ubuntu 9.09 Jaunty Jackalope *	Mac OS X 10.6 Snow Leopard
Make the computer easier to see			
Display magnifier	✓	✓	✓
Colour and contrast adjustment	✓	✓	✓
Custom icon sizes		✓	✓
Remove animations and background images	✓		
Ability to use without a display			
Screen reader	✓	✓	✓
Work with Braille displays	✓	✓	✓
Audio description for videos	✓		
Dialogue box talking alerts			✓
Talking clock			✓
Use computer without mouse or keyboard			
On screen keyboard	✓	✓	✓
Handwriting recognition (with suitable input device)			✓
Speech recognition	✓		✓
Make the mouse easier to use			
Change size of mouse pointer and cursor	✓	✓	✓
Use keyboard to control mouse	✓	✓	✓
Multi-touch laptop mouse pad			✓
Simulated secondary clicks		✓	
Dwell click (initiating click when pointer stopped)		✓	
Activate window when hovering over with mouse	✓		
Make the keyboard easier to use			
Adjust for sticky keys	✓	✓	✓
Adjust for key repeat	✓	✓	✓
Adjust for slow keys	✓	✓	✓
Use text and visual alternatives for sounds			
Visual alerts	✓		✓
Text captions for dialogue boxes	✓		

* Ubuntu version 9.10 Karmic Koala was unavailable for comparison at time of review.

Further reading and resources

Microsoft’s Windows 7 accessibility page <http://windows.microsoft.com/en-us/windows7/What-accessibility-features-does-Windows-offer>

Ubuntu’s accessibility page www.ubuntu.com/products/whatisubuntu/accessibility

Apple’s accessibility page www.apple.com/accessibility/

Easy, Free and Quick Accessibility www.ichub.org.uk/publications/easy_free_and_quick_ict_accessibility.pdf

Snow Leopard OS 10.6

This autumn has seen the release of Microsoft's Windows 7, Ubuntu Linux 9.10 and Apple's Mac OS 10.6, aka Snow Leopard. Whilst all three operating systems we've covered here in Computanews 154 all feature significant improvements – none of them will drastically change the way you work. Lasa's Miles Maier looks under the hood of Apple's upgraded operating system..

Snow Leopard focuses mostly on improving processing speed and connectivity with Windows and Exchange Server. Unlike the licensing nightmare that is Windows 7, Snow Leopard comes in one version at one price (under £25 from Amazon.co.uk) for business and home users. Users of Windows and Linux will probably not be enticed to switch to Mac - unless they were already planning to - but this is an essential and nicely priced upgrade for existing users of Apple's OS 10.5.

Exchange Server support

Snow Leopard's biggest new feature is improved support for Exchange, Microsoft's e-mail, contact, and calendar server. Connecting the Mac to the server is as simple as adding an Exchange account in Apple's Mail application, and it will automatically synchronise e-mail messages in Mail, contacts in Address Book, and Exchange calendars and tasks in iCal. This makes it even easier to integrate the Mac into networks that have standardised on Exchange.

64 bit speed boost

Under the bonnet, the biggest change is that almost every Apple application included in Snow Leopard has been rewritten to run

in 64-bit mode. The computing world is slowly moving towards 64 bit computing for two main reasons: (i) 64-bit computing is necessary if you want programs on your computer to have access to more than 4GB of RAM and (ii) certain intensive tasks - processing large video or images files – will be much quicker. You'll need a newer Mac powered by an Intel Core 2 Duo processor or an Intel Xeon processor to take advantage of the extra computing power.

Preview

Apple's Preview app – which is able to preview PDFs and image file formats like TIFF, JPEG and GIF - gets an upgrade. Preview can now detect and import images directly from a USB-connected digital camera or scanner. It also provides some basic image correction tools for your imported images.

Preview also gets a new Annotations Toolbar. This enables you to add annotations or comments to document or image opened in Preview.

Accessibility?

The Mac OS has always been well known for good design and usability and VoiceOver, the Mac's inbuilt screen reader that narrated

whatever was on the Mac's display, gets a major upgrade. VoiceOver is now able to read a summary of a Web page - including the title, number of tables, headers and links. See our accessibility comparison table on page 8 for more.

Malware Check

Macs have also long enjoyed a reputation for being more secure and less virus prone than other operating systems. Snow Leopard introduces Malware Check to provide a certain degree of built-in protection against dangerous software downloaded from the Internet or disk images mounted from external drives.

In conclusion

The three operating systems we've covered offer significant upgrades to their existing users, and if you're perfectly happy with your current OS, there is unlikely to be a compelling reason for you to make the jump to a new OS.

Knowledgebase Forum

Are you upgrading or switching OS? Join the discussion at the Knowledgebase Forum: <http://bit.ly/4ckl05>

What's going on when I do without wires?

In a personal view by “a data communications person who fell into mobile technology a few years ago and often still wonders why it works (and sometimes doesn't)”, John Davies attempts to demystify the technical and commercial issues driving radio based network services.

Lots of people are using mobile broadband these days. The mobile networks allegedly think it's their ARPU (average revenue per user) birthday! The UK mobile phone market is saturated (2007 number - 121 live mobile connections per 100 of population) so anything that will generate more usage is good for their (financial) bottom line. Some networks, such as 3, are even selling voice over IP (mostly Skype) over mobile broadband. This is in competition with their own conventional landline voice services and is potentially harming revenue.

Wi-Fi and mobile broadband both use packet radio techniques and, like wired LANs (Local Area Networks such as you probably have in your office), owe their ancestry to Aloha (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ALOHAnet>). Why do they perform differently?

Firstly, mobile broadband is a service provided by phone companies. Mobile phone companies may be highly competitive and try to be very trendy but at root they are old BT with a more commercial attitude. When they sell you broadband they want it to work so you will use it as much as possible (more revenue) and will stay with them (market share). Wi-Fi is mostly

free-to-use. Even if you pay for it you don't pay more for doing more. Even charging networks like the coffee shop chains charge by time, not data sent.

Secondly, the technology is built with different intentions. Both use ideas from anarchic old Aloha but mobile broadband is based on “souped up” GPRS (General Packet Radio Service), invented by the phone companies. Your mobile device has to ask the network for bandwidth, just as your mobile phone has to ask for a channel - and if they are all used up on the local mobile base station then you are out of luck. Wi-Fi was designed for private office networks where users were made to act nicely by the local system administrator and there was “bandwidth to burn”.

The Black Art - What's good (and what's bad) about using radio instead of wires

The rest of us, me included, are inclined to regard radio technology as a black art. Why do signals up at about 2GHz (where Orange has always operated, wavelength about 6 inches) go round corners and get into basements so easily? Why do wireless mice and keyboards keep

losing contact with their dongles only inches away? Why don't all those 802.11g Wi-Fi users on the default channel 11 get in each others way more than they do?

The truth is that the radio engineers regard it as a black art too. Your radio guru understands what's going on about as much as your doctor knows what's really happening in your body. Only occasionally does he admit it of course.

So radio is great for getting information from here to there without visible means of support but don't rely on it. In particular, don't assume it will work in a new place, at a different time under different interference conditions even in different climatic conditions. If you have a cable (or fibre) use it. Ask a radio engineer if he or she uses a wireless keyboard or mouse and expect the answer “No!”

Remember free Wi-Fi and where did it go?

Why can't we just have free Wi-Fi everywhere like some of the pundits were predicting a few years back? One of those pundits, Professor Jon Crowcroft, hasn't given up on the dream of free

mobile Wi-Fi (“Wi-Fi ‘co-op’ could provide internet for all” <http://tinyurl.com/crowcroft08>). However, it seems unlikely in the face of opposition from mobile operators who have a vested interest in seeing a substantial return on the 3G licenses (third generation mobile wireless) they over-paid for back in 2000.

Many academic environments have long supported free Wi-Fi access, but concerns about network security and congestion is universal. Some projects for general public access have failed on cost grounds or look to have a limited “free lifetime”. But the dream is still alive and mesh networking (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesh_networking) may help lower costs and improve network resilience.

About the author

John Davies is semi-retired but continues to be active as CTO of



WIRELESS IS GOOD WHEN
CABLES ARE AWKWARD

Movirtu (www.movirtu.com) “bringing mobile telecoms to the Bottom Billion”. He was Director of iT4Communities (www.it4communities.org.uk) from 2005 to 2008. jid@flying-boat.co.uk

Knowledgebase

Going Mobile In The Wireless revolution

www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/wirelessrevolution

Wireless Networks
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/wirelessnetworks

Wireless Networking Security Considerations
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/wirelesssecurity

Is moving from a cabled to wireless network a sensible option?

In response to a query on the UKRiders list regarding the downside of wireless networks, Morgan Killick of ESP Projects, Sheffield and Marcus Pennell of SCIP, Brighton made the following points:

- Do a Wi-Fi survey of the area using NetStumbler (www.netstumbler.com) or similar because Wi-Fi can be subject to interference/cross-talk from other Wi-Fi transmitters.
- Wi-Fi just isn't as reliable as cabling because the signal tends to fluctuate and may drop out. This makes Wi-Fi unsuitable for networking desktop computers, servers and using data intensive applications like a database.
- 802.11g is half duplex (it can't send and receive data at the same time); 802.11n can but is more expensive.
- Wi-Fi signal degenerates through thick brick walls in older buildings and modern pre-stressed concrete in modern buildings. But Wi-Fi access points can be daisy-chained to extend the signal into difficult areas.
- Consider the security implications of introducing Wi-Fi. WEP security (Wired Equivalent Privacy) is relatively easy to hack; WPA (Wi-Fi Protected Access) is better than but still not as secure as cable.
- Bear in mind that cabled networks are faster and more robust than wireless networks – this makes them better suited networking desktop computers, servers and using data intensive applications like a database.

Can students contribute to the local ICT support mix?

Readers with long memories might recall an article in the Circuit Rider special issue of *Computanews* 119/120 in August 2002 entitled ICT support in the community sector – the “BrisCIT” vision. In the article, Nick Plant of the University of the West of England described how his students were helping provide ICT support to the voluntary sector in Bristol. In this follow up, Nick brings us up to date on the scheme, and lessons learnt.

ICT development and support workers such as Circuit Riders or others active at local or sub-regional level might find it useful to consider how far students can contribute ICT support in the voluntary and community sector (VCS). This article examines how this can work and at some of the risks and benefits involved.

Many universities and colleges are increasingly keen on what they call “knowledge exchange”, and there are funding streams for collaboration between higher education and business or community organisations. Some have strategic initiatives on public and community engagement too.

VCS organisations, activists, or Circuit Riders concerned about ICT support might therefore find it useful to try to find the right contact in their local academic institution to see what, if anything, is on offer. Some Universities like

my own - have specialised schemes in place. Ours has been running for 24 years now, so it actually pre-dates the above funding streams and policy developments by a long time! And in fairness it’s pretty unique...

Our student consultancy scheme involves teams of around three to five final year undergraduates working on live consultancy projects for local organisations, including VCS groups, each

academic year. Client organisations get a free support service, and students get fantastic opportunities for learning on-the-job as a powerful complement to classroom study. Also, academics like me enjoy making a difference and continuing to develop knowledge from practical experience (a crucial ingredient of genuine ‘knowledge exchange’ for

me).

One of the biggest virtues of this scheme from a user perspective is that the students are focused on information systems (as we call it), not (just) ICT. Their academic programmes prioritise the human and social contexts and issues involved in applications of ICT not just the technical nuts and bolts. So although some clients are inevitably and quite reasonably ‘looking for solutions’, they often get a broader take on information

management, organisational systems supported by ICT, and IT strategy from student consultancy than

they get from other helpers.

So, yes, our consultancy teams frequently get involved in building web sites, developing database systems, configuring office software, setting up networks and exploring social media innovations. But they also do lots of user training, develop support materials, help appraise ICT in the

Easton-based Baggator provides programmes of informal education, skills training and leisure activities for young people up to the age of 25. Its key objective is to provide an enabling environment in this disadvantaged area of Bristol, for young people to develop their self-confidence, enabling them to pursue personal ambitions and help them find personal fulfilment.

This purpose is pursued through a range of activities, such as sports, gardening and healthy eating, a homework club, football training and occasionally international youth travel and camping.

The UWE student team looked at the various needs of Baggator and worked on bringing together much of the information held in diaries and registers about their sponsors, the volunteers and the young people who were attending or working at Baggator's centre, the Pickle Factory, as well as all the events planned and carried out by the organisation.

The database system that resulted should help Baggator keep closer account and structure on who is at the centre and what they are doing, and allow the organisation to expand their activities and possible sponsorships.

www.baggator.org

conduct feasibility studies. Sometimes they don't actually do any technical development work as such - it all depends on need, which we insist they find out and document first.

Some of our best projects in recent years have focused on requirements analysis and evaluation of alternative systems, or delivered specification, tender development or forward planning support. The model is therefore of hybrid 'go betweens' helping non-technical client personnel communicate and work effectively with other ICT specialists, by virtue of being both tech-savvy and tuned in to the social and organisational context. This goes to the heart of a contemporary 'information systems' approach as many of us see it. Sadly, research consistently confirms that this approach is conspicuously lacking in the VCS, as in other sectors - did you ever hear about large-scale government IT failures?

However, there are risks and issues to look at carefully too. Ongoing support and sustainability is usually top of our list: students have a habit of finishing their course and leaving the client behind! We build sustainability measures fully into our scheme (including the assessment criteria), insist that students identify follow-up support needs and plan ongoing support.

They're also expected to avoid undermining existing helpers and to complement their role. And we stress heavily to our clients that as soon as they start working with their student teams they should be figuring out how they will continue development work at the end. We bring in a local

VCS professional to advise and assist on this.

Space does not permit a detailed examination of risks and 'watch-fors', but over the years we've learnt from experience what makes a viable three-way community-University-student partnership, and made the factors progressively more explicit. These are now published in advance to prospective clients, and our search and selection process is fronted by a mutual risk analysis.

Details of these factors are available on our scheme web site at www.bit.uwe.ac.uk/stucons/ along with much more on how the scheme works, example projects, illustrations, etc.

In conclusion, our scheme generally works well but we're risk-aware and try to avoid complacency. So going back to the headline question, students can form an invaluable part of a local system of ICT support in the VCS, though I recommend viewing this type of intervention as one complementary element of a good mix, and ensuring that the risks as well as opportunities involved in this form of support (like any other) are addressed in full.

About the author

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workplace, optimise office systems, develop strategy and

How free is free?

Anne Stafford, Programme Manager at iT4Communities (iT4C), delivered a presentation at the recent Lasa Circuit Rider Conference on best practice for working with IT volunteers. In this article, we report back on the session.

The iT4C volunteering programme has IT requirements analysis at its core and Anne speaks to many hundreds of VCS groups looking for volunteer IT support every year. But how can we best prepare an organisation to work with an IT volunteer? What preparation is necessary and how can risks be minimised? What are the pros and cons of pro bono work from both points of view?

What role do ICT volunteers play?

In small and medium sized organisations the volunteer will typically be someone who comes and fixes the occasional problem or it will be people who develop projects (for example, a database or a website). It is advisable to have a fixed end and handover for all projects but well cared for volunteers will often be on hand to make changes/fixes at a later date. Documentation/mapping is a key element of the project - one commonly observed problem is organisations not able to update a website done by volunteers – documenting, training and handover is vitally important. It is important for a named person in the organisation to feel confident

that they know what they need to about the volunteer project.

An example was given by a session attendee of a project where a lot of time was spent developing the project plan but the student volunteer was disengaged once the element of their college course was completed. The lesson learnt here was that it is important to understand the motivation of volunteer.

The best projects for volunteers to work on should not be mission critical or urgent, but are clearly defined, valuable, strategic and sustainable. One delegate said that their main experience had been dealing with issues after the volunteer has gone and reinforced the fact that it is important for volunteers to document work done in order to aid the organisation in long-term.

Organisations should consider the cost savings and independent advice that working with both a volunteer and a paid for IT service provider can bring. As with using any outside consultancy or assistance, there are risks with using volunteers and organisations need to think about how these risks can be minimised.

Working with volunteers

iT4C has developed processes for getting organisations ready for working with a volunteer. Key points that organisations need to be alerted to are:

- using a volunteer for ongoing support is not sustainable
- volunteers need to be managed and have a named contact
- organisations need to own the work of the volunteer
- do not underestimate the internal support needed when organisations take on volunteers – using a volunteer isn't free, there are costs in terms of time, management and change
- there needs to be management buy-in
- project responsibility lies with the organisation not the volunteer
- the project needs to be well defined - no brief will mean scope creep and project hiatus
- communicate effectively and in a timely fashion – this is especially important in small organisations
- treat volunteers professionally and effectively and be aware that they might not understand VCS culture



- sometimes it's quicker to pay someone to come in and do it than find a volunteer and brief them...

Getting started

Prior to working with a volunteer, organisations need to consider a number of points:

- know what is wanted first before advertising for a volunteer - iT4C has staff to help think through this stage
- consider the risks and risk minimisation - ensure that the project is suitable for a volunteer
- a volunteer broker or ICT development worker may be able to help with the above –

possible that an organisation might require a volunteer to assist with project definition even before they get a volunteer in to carry out the project itself!

- be prepared to interview a potential volunteer; have questions to ask and have resources ready
- set aside plenty of time to monitor the project and support the volunteer

Anne pointed out that iT4C has online resources, checklists etc to assist with the processes and can mediate between organisations and volunteers and their process includes a long 'project definition' phone call and ongoing support to anyone looking for a volunteer through iT4C.

In summary...

Anne rounded up with a number of key pointers "Planning an ICT project for a volunteer (or indeed anyone!) is key to its success. In the right role volunteers bring an independent view, enthusiasm for the work of an organisation and professional skills that they may otherwise not be able to afford.

However, some IT work is best delivered with a Service Level Agreement (SLA) and professional indemnity."

Resources

See Anne's presentation online at www.slideshare.net/ukriders/how-free-is-free-best-practice-for-working-with-it-volunteers

Visit iT4C's website www.it4communities.org.uk for information on their volunteering programme, case studies, examples of opportunities and their annual IT volunteer awards.

Knowledgebase

Who Do You Need: Volunteer, Consultant or Staff
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/volunteerconsultantorstaff

Working With ICT Volunteers
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/workingwithvolunteers

Computanews

Lasa services

knowledgebase

independent ICT information + advice
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk

SUPPLIERS DIRECTORY

connecting you with trusted technology suppliers
www.suppliersdirectory.org.uk



aims

advice + information management system
www.lasa.org.uk/aims

multikulti

information + advice in community languages
www.multikulti.org.uk

rightsnet

the welfare rights website for advisors
www.rightsnet.org.uk



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www.lasa.org.uk

supporting the sector
through uncertain times

About Lasa

Established in 1984, Lasa has provided ICT advice to the voluntary sector for 25 years. Its two main aims are to promote social inclusion through access to social welfare law, information, advice and guidance; and to promote an efficient and effective sector through improving access to impartial ICT advice and support resources – such as Computanews and the London e-bulletin (www.lasa.org.uk/lasa/mailling-lists)

Our online ICT Knowledgebase (www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk) is a comprehensive source of independent expert ICT advice for VCS organisations, now containing over 300 articles. The Suppliers Directory (www.suppliersdirectory.org.uk) connects VCS organisations with over 100 approved suppliers of ICT products and support services across England. Lasa is also noted for its consultancy work and leadership in developing the Circuit Rider model of local ICT support. (<http://ukriders.lasa.org.uk/>)

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City Parochial Foundation
Cripplegate Foundation

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
The Law Society Charity
Legal Services Commission
London Councils
The London Legal Support Trust
Wates Foundation

Credits

Computanews has been published by Lasa since 1984.

Editor: Ian Runeckles
Design: Miles Maier
Cartoons by Phil Evans.

Lasa, Universal House, 88-94
Wentworth Street, London E1 7SA

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Tel: 020 7426 4473

Registered charity no: 800140

Published: November 2009



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