

IT Corner – April 2004

UPS Fun

Well, I have finally "bitten the bullet" and bought a UPS. My laptop battery has finally decided to quit working altogether and after seeing that Hugh and Carol have been successfully using a UPS to power their laptop (when no power is there) I made the decision...

To begin with, as you may already be aware, a UPS provides electrical power when there is no power (ie, NAWEC decides it is "business as normal" and shuts down for the day at 11:00 in the morning). However, you may not be aware that UPSs are intended only to buy you time to perform an orderly shutdown, not run your equipment for long periods of time when no power is available from our friendly NAWEC people.

A UPS is basically a battery that is continuously charging that provides power through a series of special plugs on the back. When the power fails (not "if" you will notice) the UPS will continue to provide power drawn from its battery. While it is straightforward to attach normal computer equipment (that is, a desktop computer) to a UPS using the supplied cables connecting a laptop is not so simple since every laptop uses different plugs to connect it to a power source. A bit of invention was in order if I wanted to attach my beloved laptop to my new UPS. Incidentally, Carol and Hugh got around this by sacrificing their laptop power cable (which I was not ready to do). They cut (shudder) the power cable of the laptop before the plug then "spliced" a UPS-style power cable onto the end (cutting that cable in half as well). I was not quite prepared for the sacrifice my laptop power cable (meaning when I got back to the UK I would not be able to plug it into the wall without replacing the cable).

It just so happened that at work we had a power extension cable (power bar) that did not have a power connector on it, so I did the following:



Don't try this at home

Yes, that is cello tape holding the wires in place. Yes, it is VERY scary. It was even more scary how I figured out which wires to plug into which hole: Trial and error (shudder, literally). Though I simply used the power bar and checked to see when the lights came on, and stood back when I turned on the power, obviously.

Anyway, the result is that now I have enough time when NAWEC stops to shut down my laptop for which I am very relieved. I also have a UPS that I am sure will be of use to the office when I leave (whenever that is).

Free and Open Source Software

An interesting new development has recently been happening with regards to the computing community here in The Gambia and that is the beginning a group of local professionals to meet and discuss issues related to the use of Free and Open Source Software (FOSS, as we MUST have an acronym). Essentially, this is the use of free operating system software such as Linux (<http://www.linux.org>) and office software such as OpenOffice (<http://www.openoffice.org>) in a business or government setting. Recently a small two-day session was held which had demos of how to install and use this software as well as various discussions about the relative drawbacks of using such software. I was (blush) one of the speakers and I also appeared on a GRTS program discussing this issue.

This is an interesting new development though I did point out to the participants that it is not such a good idea to say "Ok, the software is free, let's use it". You have to consider what "using it" means. This could involve re-training people that are used to using existing software and, in the case of Linux, it could mean that you need technically skilled IT people to support the operating system. The initial cost of software is only part of the actual cost to a business (something that consultants or accountants often ignore). Having said that, I am a strong supporter of the movement and think it could have a significant and positive impact here in The Gambia. At my workplace we are using OpenOffice on our laptops since the supplier "accidentally" did not ship the laptops with Microsoft Office pre-installed. The people using these laptops have reported no problems and are able to use OpenOffice quite easily.

If you are interested, please contact me. We have demonstration CDs of both Linux and OpenOffice that we can provide copies of as long as you give us blank CDs in return.

File Transfer: The Death of the Floppy Disk?

On my recent trip to England I picked up a USB key which, in case you did not know, is a device for storing files, like a floppy disk. The difference being that a USB key stores up to 1,000 times as much information, it is MUCH smaller (about 3cm by 1cm, and very thin -- many people attach them to their keyring) and more protected. It is also very cool (well, cooler than a floppy disk). We are testing them at my office to see if they might be a viable alternative to floppy disks which die suddenly here after about 5 days exposed to the heat, humidity and dust.

How do they work? Glad you asked that. Basically, they plug into the USB port on the computer. What is a USB port? This is a plug that most computers made in the last 7 or 8 years have that allows you to connect things to your computer (like printers, modems, etc). Is that all there is to it, just plug it in? Yep. Operating systems beyond Windows 98 (Second Edition) will immediately recognize the key as a disk drive and it will show up in Explorer (or "My Computer"). If the operating system does not recognize it (very doubtful) the keys normally come with the necessary software to allow it to. So, when I need to copy files from one computer to another, I go to the first computer, plug in the key, copy the files to the key, remove the key, plug the key into the other computer then finally copy the files from the key to the other computer. Simple.

News

- I have a number of recent computer magazines from the UK if anyone would like to borrow them.
- Steve's DVD list has changed, ask for it if you are interested in borrowing, perhaps the last Matrix movie?...
- The civil service "ICT Cadre" is in it's final stages and it looks like it will be implemented very shortly. This governs all jobs related to ICT (IT) within the civil service.
- 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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