

IT Corner – The UK Perspective – August 2005

New Laptop

Well, after The Gambia essentially ate my old laptop, an IBM Thinkpad, I have finally worked enough again to be able to afford a replacement. The new one is another Thinkpad that is slightly (!) more powerful than the old one with about 3 times the battery life. Five years is really pushing it for using a laptop...The old laptop had certainly been very useful for many years and now it goes into retirement with my mother...Hope she does not mind not having a (working) battery (killed by NAWEC).



Of particular importance in The Gambia is a laptop which has a battery that will last a long time and survive frequent charge/discharge cycles (that is, power going off and on at all hours). Only laptops manufactured in recent years are suited to such conditions (for example, the “Centrino” type of laptop is designed having those goals in mind – along with wireless network connectivity). My advice would be to look for laptops containing laptop-specific CPUs (such as AMD Mobile and Pentium M) rather than those that use normal desktop CPUs (such as Pentium, without the “M” or “Centrino” name). These laptop-specific CPUs have been created with low power consumption in mind.

IT in The Gambia (Part 1)

It has occurred to me that I have never discussed why the effective use of IT is important in developing countries such as The Gambia. I suppose this is my fault in that I can see this but perhaps I should elucidate (thank goodness for my spell checker!)...

IT, in many ways, is the great leveller. A student from Basse using the Internet has to exactly the same information from the Internet as a student living in London. The Internet can empower those that use it to improve themselves and their community. Never before in the history of mankind has such a tool been available to as many people as it is now.

A bit of a digression as way of illustration: One of the first things I did as a volunteer was working on providing free Internet access for my province in Canada. It was the belief of myself and our many other volunteers that the Internet was a resource that could provide ordinary people with a universal form of communication and the ultimate source of information. It was a successful endeavour with more than 5,000 members at it's peak who seemed to believe as we did.

Information is power. IT is a tool that provides the key to this power. Used correctly I really believe it can greatly improve people's lives.

I am also very much aware of the fact that people sometimes see computers as a panacea and throw computers at a problem in the hope that something magic will happen. Computers are a TOOL but people are really the key. An IT project is a failure if it does not pay attention to the needs of the users (typical, it seems, of some big donors who seem to think their system from Cape Town in South Africa will work in Soma). People considering using IT should really do the following:

- **Step 1** - TALK to people, understand what they need, what they want.
- **Step 2** - Figure out if IT will help (if there is a better non-IT solution USE IT).
- **Step 3** - If you can use IT (and ONLY if you can) put in the necessary IT and associated support structures (long term support, anti-virus, maintenance, etc, etc).

Is it ridiculous to be talking about computers in a country where electricity is often unreliable and Internet access available only to a few in their own homes? Are they simply luxury items that should be set aside until basic needs such as food and water are dealt with? The truth is that using computers

can provide the knowledge to *grow* food and *find* water. True, we can fall into that trap again of throwing computers at a problem, however, if used correctly...the sky is the limit.

Random News from the UK

A quick run-down of some of the things happening with IT here in the UK (at least those that might be of interest to readers):

- **Edinburgh Festivals** – Having just visited the festival this year I was surprised to see the use of the Internet in booking tickets. The simplest and quickest way to get tickets is to use the festival web site. The ticket booth on Princes street is a big tent full of computers that you use to book tickets from their web site! This only goes to show the prevalence of the Internet in every day life. More and more public and private services are now available on the web and soon these services will **only** be available on the web...
- **London Bombings** – It was interesting to see how the various news agencies appealed to the public in the immediate aftermath of the bombings in London to provide them with photos and information about what was going on. It worked with shaky images taken on the stricken tube trains and of people fleeing the scene taken by members of the public with their mobile phones (even video!). With the advent of every mobile containing a camera news is even more immediate than ever before. What will come next?
- **Broadband** – News last IT corner, news again this time. Internet access is becoming cheaper and cheaper with speeds getting faster and faster. Having just visited Shetland I was pleased to see a VERY fast Internet connection in the house I was staying in (admittedly it has only been available for a few months). This was in the main town but plans are to have access available to all islanders within four months. In a place as isolated as Shetland (with no fixed connection to the mainland) this bodes well for developing countries...Things are only getting better as far as Internet access is concerned.

Gambia News

- The new "Gambia Portal" www.yegoo.gm web site was launched on August 1st with the President in attendance. It is hoped that this will alleviate the amount of traffic on the country's Internet connection to the outside world by providing e-mail and re-distributed news sources. This remains to be seen as the site is still very rudimentary and does not (yet) compare favourably with other sites such as the BBC or Google.
- It is with a bit of shock that Gamtel have released their International tariff on their web site (ignoring, for the moment, that most people do not have an International telephone line). Cheapest rates are between 11pm and 7am (though reduced rates are available between 6pm and 11pm). One would assume this also applies for phone calls within the country as well but then again...
- 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).

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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