

Internetting in an instant

The Internet sits squarely at the head of the information revolution which is starting to find its way into the boardrooms of British business. That its benefits are many and varied there can be no doubt, but what a growing number of users are looking for is a simple one-stop solution to accessing Internet E-mail, files and discussion groups with the minimum fuss and maximum value for money. There are plenty of companies that supply a straight connection to the Internet; for example, Delphi and Demon provide full service, whereas Cix, CompuServe and others provide a limited connection to the Internet and the Internet connection is secondary to the service's main business. However, there is one service that specialises in just this sort of connection.

The PC User Group can get your business on to the Internet without hassle by means of a deceptively simple piece of software which goes by the name of WinNET. If you run Microsoft Windows 3.x and have a modem and a phone line, you could be up and running on the Internet in under an hour for less than £10 including VAT.

BACK TO BASICS

With something in the region of 10,000 members, the PC User Group has offered interactive Internet access through its Connect Bulletin Board System for more than six years. However, it realised that there were a large number of users who didn't want such resources as the World Wide Web, Gopher, Telnet or IRC, but instead required just E-mail and Usenet news. It also realised that for these services to be cost-effective, the user must be able to perform the majority of time-consuming tasks, such as preparing and reading E-mail and news offline while not incurring telephone or usage charges.

Above all else though, the system had to be easy to set up and use. The WinNET software, from an American software house with the apt name of Computer Witchcraft, fits the bill perfectly. Let's take a closer look at what you get.

WinNET comes on a single disk, which is freely distributable, and is used to connect to the PC User Group's WinNet-UK server. Installing the software is easy as it comes with a very intuitive setup routine. In fact, we would go as far as to say that WinNET's installation is far and away the best we've seen for Internet access software. All you need to do is answer a few questions about the type of computer and modem you are using, and how you want to pay your bill. Then you can choose your own username and hostname for your E-mail address. You will be `username@hostname.win-uk.net` as far as the rest of the Internet is concerned, but choose your E-mail address wisely as you might find it difficult or impossible to change at a later date without setting up a completely new account. The hostname has to be unique to you, so if you choose a very popular name you may find it is already in use in which case you will have to try again. Remember that as far as the online community is concerned you will only be known by your E-mail address, so make sure that it reflects well on your business.

Once you have filled in all the relevant information, WinNET automatically starts setting up your account. It will connect to the WinNET-UK server via your modem, and verify your details. This takes a few minutes, and once it's finished you should see a message telling you that everything has gone smoothly. The information is processed on the server, WinNET disconnects and then calls back again to check that the link is OK and downloads some introductory E-mail for your attention. You are now connected to the Internet.

On the same disk as the WinNET software you will find a copy of WinNET Tools; a set of utilities that really help release the power of the Internet through your WinNET-UK account. Installing this is simple too: just run `A:\tools\setup.exe`.

USING WINNET-UK

There are so many features worthy of investigation that it is hard to know where to begin. However, as this is primarily an

CompuServe and the World Wide Web offer a world of information, but businesses might not want the bells and whistles of a specific Internet service. Davey Winder explains how potential Internetters who only want basic E-mail facilities can use WinNET to access the Internet with minimum fuss and maximum value for money



WinNET's simplicity might just be the answer to your Internet dreams



FTPmail extends the reach of WinNET



You can even send faxes, without a fax machine, using WinNET software

E-mail account that seems as good a place as any. At first glance you may be fooled into thinking that WinNET isn't a particularly powerful E-mail program, but the simplicity of the interface is deceptive.

select the attach binary mail menu option and the file will be UUencoded (a process that converts 8bit binary information into 7bit Ascii information) automatically. If the recipient of the mail is another WinNET

Everything is very intuitive, so you just click on a button and then fill in the boxes. To send an E-mail message you just select the Compose mail button and this opens a window that contains drop-down selectors for the recipient address, cc addresses and so on. You can either type the correct address in or select an address from the drop-down list that is taken from your Address book.

The Address book feature lets you use simple aliases for those complicated E-mail addresses, so, for instance, instead of having to remember that Smith Accounting's is 12345.4321@compuserve.com, you would just give it an alias of Smith's. Then when you select Smith's from your Address book, the full E-mail address is automatically inserted for you. A simple, but perfectly adequate, editor enables you to type in your message. Should you want to send some E-mail while using applications such as Microsoft Word for Windows or WordPerfect for Windows, then you can run the QuickMail program directly using an appropriate macro.

Although WinNET does not support the Multi-purpose Internet Mail Extensions (Mime) standard – and to be honest, this is far from being standard yet – it does allow you to easily send binary files attached to your E-mail using the very popular UUencode-decode process. With WinNET however, this process is invisible to the user, as you just

user then they can automatically decode the file, while anyone else just has to run their own UUdecode program to get at the information. To review and edit your E-mail before you actually send it there is a useful Queue Editor option.

For E-mail that you receive, or the courtesy copies of your own mail that you may want to keep for reference, you can create Mail Folders into which you can sort your correspondence. A powerful search facility helps you to locate messages stored in your folders by using a keyword search method. Reading your E-mail is as simple as you would expect; you just double-click on the item in your mailbox. To read the next or previous message you can use the appropriate buttons on the toolbar.

Messages can be printed with ease by clicking on the button that looks like a printer. To save you typing in your name or company details every time you send a message, there is a handy Signature feature that will automatically insert these details for you. To use this facility you just select the Signature button from the WinNET Tools program.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

WinNET Tools helps to boost the power of WinNET considerably. Once you have the program up and running you will find yourself presented with a number of buttons to select. Probably of most use initially is the Request button. This allows you to select from a list of help files about WinNET and the Internet, program updates and useful utilities programs.

Once you have made your selections you can then ask WinNET to go and request these files from the WinNET-UK Mail server. Connect again in an hour or so and your files will be waiting for you to collect. This facility also offers a request service for mailing lists and a movie database server.

In a similar fashion, you can also request files from any of the thousands of Anonymous FTP sites on the Internet. These are storage areas on computers connected to the Internet that let anyone with



Deciding which of the numerous newsgroups to join is made slightly easier with a built-in keyword search facility



Just one of the many newsgroups you get access to with WinNET-UK: this one deals with all sorts of online news stories

an Internet connection download files; collectively, you could call them the biggest shareware library in the world.

Usually you would need to have a full Internet connection to make use of the File Transfer Protocol (FTP) resource, but WinNET lets you use something called FTPMail instead. This is a method of using E-mail to FTP files across the Internet, and is often so complicated that few users bother unless they are seasoned Internet explorers. WinNET has made the process easy, reducing the complicated command procedure to a matter of filling in boxes and choosing from drop-down menus. A number of FTP sites are already included on the list, so you can just select one of these. All the command options come with an explanation when you select them, and there is online help available just to make sure you can't go wrong.

Because you need to know the exact location of a file before you can request it, WinNET has an option to retrieve a listing of all files kept within a directory at the selected FTP site. The directory containing files for Anonymous FTP is nearly always called 'pub' (short for public), so if you ask for the listing of this you will be OK most of the time.

Another clever feature available from the Tools program is an option to automate the process of logging on to the WinNET-UK server and posting/collecting your E-mail. Selecting the Scheduler button opens a window with a number of time and

date options. Selecting the time-band for weekdays, Saturdays and Sundays that you would like WinNET to connect ensures that the program will do so at the specified time every day.

This is a useful feature when you consider that some of the news groups carry large amounts of traffic which can exceed 2Mb of data per day, so being able to download at cheap rate phone times is a positive advantage. It should be noted, however, that WinNET won't connect at an exact time every day but rather within a time band in order to prevent the server getting too congested with callers all trying to connect at the same time. This makes a very handy feature for keeping in touch when you are away from the office.

Also handy for keeping in touch is the Fax gateway that WinNET provides you with. Selecting this option pops up a Fax window which, in keeping with everything else, just requires you to fill in the gaps for perfect results.

READ ALL ABOUT IT

WinNET provides the user with a very cost-effective method of participating in Usenet. Currently, using WinNET-UK you can choose from around 6,000 different Newsgroups to join. These cover every conceivable topic from business management, industry news and views, through to technical support, scientific study and educational debate. Quite literally, if you have an interest in something there will be a Usenet Newsgroup that caters for it.

Joining a Newsgroup is easy enough with WinNET. First you select the News Subscriptions button from the Tools program which opens the Usenet window. From here you can search for newsgroups using keywords of interest, (the screenshot above left shows the result of a search for the word "business"). Just select the groups you want to join, then tell WinNET to connect.

It will take a few hours for your news feed to start coming through, but eventually it will. You should beware of joining too many different groups to start with as some are very busy indeed and you may find yourself unexpectedly swamped with messages. If you want to find out exactly what newsgroups you have subscribed to at any time use the Current News option, and try the News Cleanup feature when the amount of space taken up by Usenet messages starts to become excessive.

Reading Usenet News is as simple as


reading your E-mail, and in the same way it is all done off-line so you are not incurring telephone or service charges. WinNET automatically threads your Usenet messages, that is, it stores all the messages in each newsgroup in conversational order so that you can easily follow the thread of a discussion.

There are powerful search facilities available to scan through your Usenet folders to find the information you want, and are particularly useful when you are trying to cut through all the excess chatter that finds its way into most newsgroups.

Posting news is also as easy as posting E-mail, with options to reply either in the newsgroup or by E-mail just a button press away.

Surely it can't be all good news though; after all no program is perfect. Well, WinNET is no exception. The downside is that you are limiting yourself to a restricted view of the Internet, which is fine as long as you realise this from the outset. Using WinNET you don't get access to other useful Internet resources such as the ever expanding World Wide Web, or the ability to use Gophers, for example. It is possible to get terminal access to these services, similar to the access offered by such systems as Cix or Delphi, by joining the PC User Group's Connect Bulletin Board System, but that is an extra cost to bear. The biggest fault is the speed with which WinNET processes E-mail and Usenet news if you belong to more than one or two very busy newsgroups, or don't take care to delete old news on a weekly basis. In our experience this can mean that it can take in excess of an hour to process your messages before you can get the chance to read them.

Overall though, there is no doubt that WinNET is an excellent program providing you are aware of its limitations. If you want a one-stop solution to easy Internet mail and news, then you really don't have to look any further. However, if you want the same ease of use but require a greater degree of Internet access, then you may be better off looking at using the Compulink Information eXchange (Cix) in conjunction with one of the many offline readers available for that service.

WinNET-UK accounts cost just £6.75 per month. This gives the user 130 minutes of connect time, and with each connection lasting a couple of minutes that is usually more than enough. If you exceed the 130 minutes in any month, you are charged at an additional rate of £3.25 per hour. 

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