

readers' writes

Linux gets short shrift at PC World while Oxford University asks PC Advisor for help upgrading its electronic document archiving this month. And, faced with the machinations of today's IT-savvy kids, we can't help but feel sorry for school tech support staff



Kids will be kids...

I wholeheartedly agree with Dave Snape's remarks in the October 03 issue about poor computer management in schools. My primary school had no control over their network whatsoever. In fact, as the only pupil who read *PC Advisor* I was the resident computer boffin regularly asked to unjam a printer or reboot the server.

Backups were supposedly in place, but from what I could see someone had just installed a tape drive and assumed this would magically work – of course the tape was never taken out or rewound.

Within a couple of weeks I had gained most of the teachers' passwords as well as the headmistress' and regularly logged in to their accounts. With a little effort I gained access to IIS and could use the school's resources for a nice little web server for myself.

I have now moved on to secondary school, where they have a slightly more vigilant system. But two years on my primary school still hasn't deleted my account, so I can log in when I want.

Chris Santry, via email

...ICT staff fight back

I felt I had to respond after reading Dave Snape's letter in the October 03 edition. I work in a school as a network manager and I take my job very seriously. I don't know what sort of school Dave is referring to but the ICT technical staff are not employed to make lesson plans for the teachers. In my school all the teachers that educate in ICT have trained for years on the subject – the ICT technical team are only there to support and help out in lessons when required.

We have a network of 85 thin client machines and 20 PCs. All the networked PCs have system policies that stop anyone hacking into the main servers or changing files on the PC itself. The thin clients are all running applications direct from the three servers and the user accounts are stored on the file server which is backed up once a week without fail.

Life is made easier having mainly thin clients on the network, as they are far more reliable than a PC. I know of a school that has a fat client network and they have to reinstall on a regular basis.

Dave's comments are very unfair, especially his generalisation about ICT support staff. If he worked in the education field he would know that all support staff, not just those in ICT, work very hard for comparatively small salaries.

Glyn Collins, via email

Lonely Linux

I've just installed Red Hat 9.0 to dual boot on my XP machine. Being in a bit of a rush I purchased the software from my local PC World store. It all installed nicely but then I found my modem wouldn't work with Red Hat as it was an unsupported model. I did some research on the web and was reliably informed that an external US Robotics model would work fine.

I decided to head for PC World again to purchase the modem. Now I already knew the modem should work but I couldn't resist a bit of fun. Heading over to the nearest salesperson I waved the modem in the air asking if this will work under Linux. "No," came the reply. "You'll struggle to find anything that'll work under Linux." Not to be put off I purchased it anyway and, what do you know, it worked!

How does Linux ever really stand a chance in the mass market when the stores selling versions of it can't even advise what hardware to use properly?

Mark Weldon, via email

Andrew Charlesworth replies: sadly poor product training is endemic among Britain's major computer chains, where the emphasis is on selling the items manufacturers have paid to promote. Local independent retailers are usually more knowledgeable.

Back to basics

I graduated from university some years ago now, but like Nickil (star letter, September 03) I too took GCSE and A-Level computing courses. My studies covered old 8in disks, punch cards and printers and I too felt that I would

rather be studying the latest hardware and software.

However, now I work in the IT industry with Bluetooth and find my original studies have stood me in good stead. Learning about old printers introduced me to the communication ports on the back of my PC – information that is now invaluable in what I do every day.

Most Bluetooth communications are performed over a wireless equivalent of an old PC COM port. Even communicating to the Bluetooth chip can be done via a Uart (COM port chip) interface. The older systems I studied gave me the underlying principles I now employ.

The IT industry moves so fast that studying a particular device or protocol will provide a student with information that is quickly outdated. New products are produced almost daily, often turning out to be more evolution than innovation.

The hardware presented in a lot of the computing courses seem quite dated, but often the fundamental principles they introduce are far more important than any one particular product.

Chris Woods, via email

I heard it here first...

I was taken by surprise by the item *British Library goes digital* in the News section of your September 03 edition. I'm the head of Document Supply at one of the foremost science libraries in the world, so I really ought to have known of this new development. But I didn't.

A week later a Customer Update Special Edition dropped on my desk giving details of the British Library's new secure electronic delivery system. Oxford University is replacing its library management system in the next few years so I'm counting on *PC Advisor* to let me know which one it intends to buy!

'Purplepenny', via email

Destined to fail

Things are not built to last these days, I've decided, least of all electronics. My recent experience makes me think some products are simply programmed to fail. At the beginning of April my Epson 480, after more than two years of trouble-free service, suddenly and for no apparent reason ceased to work, sending an error message to 'contact supplier'. Time told

Star letter

I study computer engineering in India and use my PC and the internet for educational purposes only. Consequently, there's a mass of features on my computer that I'll never use – for example, Media Player and Messenger. I don't even require a powerful graphics card because I don't play the games supplied with Windows Me. But because these things are bundled with the machine by default, I've already had to pay for them.

If I had to purchase a new PC today I would opt for Windows 95 as it meets my requirements perfectly, is cheaper compared to XP and requires less additional resources. But no vendor supports Windows 95 nowadays.

I believe many students around the world are in the same position as me. If only an educational PC and operating system with a price tag to match was available for us students to afford.

Ashar Bhavesh, Mumbai, India

Simon Easterman replies: we agree that students should not be held back by the prohibitive costs of what is a necessary part of modern education. Microsoft, along with certain PC suppliers, does offer large discounts to educational establishments but not for private individuals. You should contact your local Microsoft representative and also approach your university to see whether it is exploiting these discounts to bring lower-cost computing to its students.

Write to us

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me to speak to Epson and Epson instructed me to buy a new printer as it would be cheaper than a repair.

A couple of weeks later Time contacted me offering an upgrade motherboard and processor (for about £200) which I declined as I am content with the performance of my 800MHz Duron. As unbelievable as it sounds, in May my Time PC suddenly stopped working again. I checked all cables, inside connections and, of course, that the memory modules were seated properly. All was how it should be.

I'll give Time its due – it did have it back to me within the week (on both occasions), but said the fault lay with an incorrectly seated memory module. Well, I knew that wasn't true and told them so. When the same failure occurred in June I taped a letter to the engineer on the case explaining the symptoms and that I had checked the seating of all components. The motherboard was replaced with a

re-conditioned board. I wonder how long it will last; the warranty ends January 04.

So was I offered the upgrade because my motherboard was programmed to self-destruct? Was my Epson 480 (part of my Time package) also set to fail so I would buy a new one? Just because I'm paranoid does not mean they aren't out to get me – or at least my hard-earned cash.

Alan Parker, via email

Ben Camm-Jones replies: I've heard countless stories about hardware failing weeks or even days after the warranty expires. Hardware and peripherals are designed to last until they become obsolete and in the fast-paced technology industry this can be just a few short years. A lot of the time the decision to upgrade is taken when your trusty PC or printer fails. Though this does hit us in the pocket, it means that we're not getting left behind by the pace of progress. ■