

Sending out an SOS

For a while now it's been clear that free technical support is on its last legs. Thank goodness, then, for an XP feature that enables us to call on the kindness of strangers



Providing technical support and troubleshooting customers' systems is an expensive business, something PC manufacturers and software developers have learned the hard way.

Because of this, there's now a wealth of advice online and, of course, more user-driven assistance in the shape of forums such as our own Helproom on PCAdvisor.co.uk.

An alternative for XP users is to call up the Remote Assistance facility to diagnose and fix their own PC or, failing that, to ask someone else to help them do so.

Remote Assistance is a refreshingly 'does what it says on the tin' type of feature that is built in to all versions of Windows XP. It works by getting someone more technically minded than yourself to troubleshoot your PC. This could mean simply linking you to the most relevant section of the Microsoft Knowledgebase where you can trawl through an exhaustive database of FAQs and get step-by-step instructions on how to fix the glitches your system has encountered.

But, armed with a .Net Passport, it also allows you to get aid from a Microsoft support professional or a friend by passing them temporary control of your system. This sounds scary but it's by invitation only and it's not quite the stab in the dark it might first seem, as the remote assistant can see what's what on your computer.

There's a certain satisfaction to be had from fixing your PC this way, not least because you haven't spent a fortune getting an engineer to pop round or run up a huge bill on a premium-rate support line while trying an endless succession of likely fixes. And who knows? You might just learn something in the process. ■

Favourite feature

Personalise the Start menu

XP's User Accounts feature allows you to personalise the Start menu with a picture as well as your preferred username. It makes switching between users not only friendlier (especially if it's not strictly *your* PC), but more intuitive too.



1 Select User Accounts in Control Panel, click the account you want to change, then choose Change my picture



2 Scroll through the images and double-click one you like. To select a completely different image choose Browse for more pictures. Now repeat step one but choose 'Change my name' instead



3 Now click the Start button to view your changes