



# Oceans of support

Secretary of state for trade and industry Patricia Hewitt has launched a study into off-shore outsourced call centres challenging the notion that UK call centres are in terminal decline.

The practice of relocating company departments abroad, usually customer service centres, has always been a controversial issue. Companies can save millions of pounds per year by relocating call centres to countries such as India, where wages are much lower.

But trade unions including the Communications Workers Union - the group responsible for all telco staff in the UK - believe outsourcing leads to a decline in service, with foreign staff having little knowledge of local issues or rival companies.

One of the world's largest IT computer manufacturers, Dell has around 6,000 call-centre staff in Bangalore and Hyderabad with plans to set up a new centre in

Chindigarh. The company was one of the first to move to India, setting up its voice-based support centre back in April 02. After a flood of complaints, however, it recently chose to move its service centres for US corporate customers back to the States.

Telco giant BT has around 2,000 call-centre staff across India. It also outsources its technical support helplines to Client Logic, a Watford-based firm with customer support in the UK and Bangalore.

But Hewitt remains convinced that UK call centres are thriving. "Our service centres now account for almost 21 million jobs and 70 percent of our economy. Carphone Warehouse has announced a new support centre in Warrington as has 3 Mobile in Glasgow. And BT, which recently opened two call centres in India, is also investing in 31 UK call centres," states Hewitt.

Official findings of the study will be released in March.



# Ripa ramifications

Internet service providers have added to the chorus of complaints about the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (Ripa) as concerns grow for the massive cost of maintaining a six-month backlog of subscriber data.

This isn't the first time that the extensions to Ripa have been criticised. Sceptics are concerned primarily about the growing list of public bodies granted access to private communications data.

According to the FIPR (Foundation for Information Policy and Research), the rules do not even make clear what information can be given to whom. While the act does categorise subscriber data, the definitions are loose and can be applied differently.

Despite reassurances from the Home Office that service providers

will be reimbursed, no actual figures have yet been discussed.

"The burden on small ISPs could potentially be enormous," says Beatrice Rogers, a senior program manager for Intellect, an industry body that represents IT businesses. Intellect is working with the government to create a set of standardised rules and costs for all ISPs.



## Sony pulls back on PSX

Sony has dropped several features from its upcoming all-in-one device, the PSX, making the much-hyped milestone product a shadow of its promised self. The PSX combines a hard disk video recorder, DVD writer, music player, photo viewer and PlayStation2 console in a single box.

But Sony has been unable to complete development in time for the year-end sales period, so has had to make some cutbacks. You can no longer play back DVD+RW discs, listen to MP3s, read CD-R discs (although audio CDs recorded on CD-Rs are supported), display TIF and GIF format images or view movies taken with Sony's Cybershot digital still camera.



# Thou shall not steal

In its campaign to hunt down and charge every fileswapper known to man, the Recording Industry Association of America has filed 41 new lawsuits against internet users accused of swapping music illegally through P2P (peer-to-peer) sites. The group, which represents music labels and record companies, is set to warn a further 90 users who may also face legal action.

This is the third wave of lawsuits brought by Riaa since September 03, with action taken against almost 400

people. Financial settlements have been reached with 220 offenders so far.

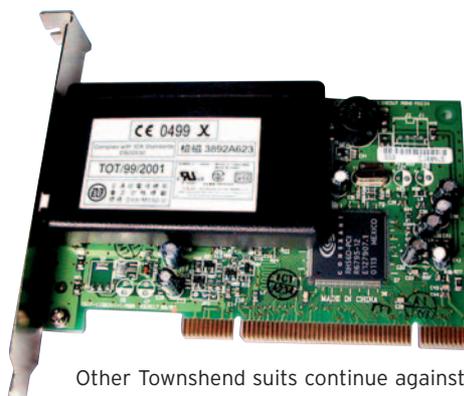
An additional 1,000 users have agreed to cease downloading illegal music under the group's Clean Slate programme, which allows fileswappers to avoid legal action on the proviso they delete existing downloaded files from their PCs and stop using P2P networks.

If found guilty, defendants could be forced to pay up to \$150,000 (around £87,000) in damages under copyright law.

## Modem mayhem

Although 56Kbps (kilobits per second) modems have been on the market since 1997, the wrangling continues over who deserves the credit and royalties for the technology. US company Analog Devices, which makes modem chipsets, has settled out of court for an undisclosed amount with Brent Townshend - the man who holds five patents on the technology.

This is the latest round of a battle that has continued since 1997 when Townshend announced that he had found a way to boost download speeds by 66 percent above the performance of the fastest modems. Many companies licensed the technology but others didn't. Modem chip maker Rockwell fought Townshend in court for three years to avoid paying, but finally settled out of court in 2001 for an undisclosed sum.



Other Townshend suits continue against chip manufacturers Agere Systems, ESS Technology, Intel and network equipment maker Cisco Systems. With virtually all commercial PCs shipping with 56K modems as standard, the number sold this year is expected to reach 120 million worldwide.

Townshend won't say how much lost profit this has meant, but if all the modems sold this year were software-based they would represent \$26.4m (£15m) in licence fees.



## Insider's view

Richard Baker

**What would your dream device be?**  
Something that takes out my contact lenses for me when I forget to after a night out on the tiles.

**What technology would you like to see widely available by the year 2020?**

Handwriting and voice recognition that work well enough to do away with the keyboard.

**What technology/product would you like to see resurrected and why?**

I know it sounds daft, but I always used to like those huge disk arrays (up to an enormous 250MB) that looked like top-loading washing machines. Compared to today's blank systems showing nothing but a few flashing lights, they had a sort of elegance that told you that this really was technology.

**Which of today's technologies will be most important in the future?**

It has got to be pervasive 64bit computing. How else will I be able to get my workable voice recognition while simultaneously dumping all that spam.

**What's in your briefcase today?**

A phone charger and a block of Post-it Notes for sticking reminders on my iPaq. I call it appropriate technology!

*Richard Baker is the European marketing manager for chip manufacturer AMD.*



# Travel just got faster

Rail operator GNER has pipped its rivals to the post by becoming the first UK operator to trial wireless broadband services.

Passengers using the train company's east-coast network between London and Scotland can take advantage of the free onboard service, although it will be restricted to first-class passengers for a three-month trial or a total of 42 trips.

Carriages will be fitted with satellite dishes that will access a combination of available networks as the train passes

through them. Connection speeds will therefore vary depending on what buildings and other structures obscure the signal along the way.

To ensure a broadband service is maintained throughout the whole of the journey - even when going through tunnels - GNER will back up the system with a series of mobile phone links.

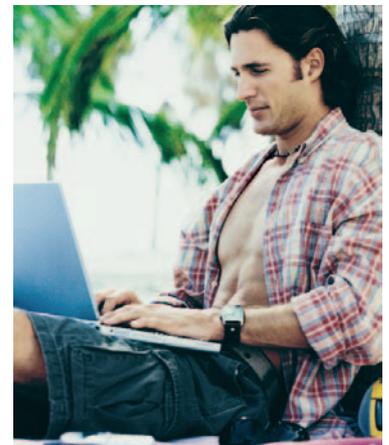
If the trial is successful, GNER plans to roll out wireless connections across 40 trains in its fleet.



## EU attacks spam sloppiness

The European Commission has begun proceedings against nine member states that have failed to implement a new directive banning junk mail. The deadline for incorporation into national law was 31 October, but by this date only six countries had implemented the rules.

The lack of enforcement means many European businesses are still free to target UK recipients, leaving those who were expecting a noticeable decrease in junk mail disappointed. The nine member states in question - Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg, Holland, Portugal, Finland and Sweden - have until February 04 to respond.



## Wireless arrival before time

The new 802.11e and 802.11i wireless standards could be hitting the market sooner than expected.

The latest protocols are designed to improve quality of service for voice calls and high-resolution video, as well as offering increased security measures. They differ from existing wireless standards, including the 802.11a, 11b and 11g, because they enhance their predecessors rather than specifying a different transmission speed and radio frequency. The specifications will be implemented in up-coming chipsets and could appear in products by late 2004.

# War of the worms



**Bad news for Microsoft.** The most virulent worms in 2003 were all so-called Windows 32 worms. In simple terms this means they affect only those computers running Microsoft's Windows software.

To track down the perpetrators, the software giant took the historic step of offering a reward in the region of half a million dollars for information leading to the arrest of the authors. Despite this, the virus writers have evaded capture and, unfortunately for Microsoft, the Win32 trend looks set to continue well into 2004.

### Top 10 2003 viruses

- |                  |                              |
|------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. W32/SoBig-F   | (19.9 percent of complaints) |
| 2. W32/Blaster-A | (15.1 percent)               |
| 3. W32/Nachi-A   | (8.4 percent)                |
| 4. W32/Gibe-F    | (7.2 percent)                |
| 5. W32/Dumaru-A  | (6.1 percent)                |
| 6. W32/Sober-A   | (5.8 percent)                |
| 7. W32/Mimail-A  | (4.8 percent)                |
| 8. W32/Bugbear-B | (3.1 percent)                |
| 9. W32/SoBig-E   | (2.9 percent)                |
| 10. W32/Klez-H   | (1.6 percent)                |

*Figures provided by antivirus firm Sophos*



## Ctrl the spill

Almost five million drinks are spilled over keyboards in British homes and offices every single week, according to figures from software giant Microsoft.

We must be a clumsy nation as most of us have spilled a cup of tea or coffee over our keyboard at least once. For the unlucky ones this results in a broken keyboard or even a complete system failure.

To address this problem, Microsoft has launched its spill-resistant wireless keyboard range. The devices incorporate drainage channels, which direct water through the base to a trough-like device. This prevents the liquid from gathering in a pool inside. Prices will start from £40.

## Clean up your act

Recognising its responsibilities under the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive, the Department of Trade and Industry has launched a set of proposals to help cut down levels of household and industrial waste, while giving consumers the chance to have their say.



One of the plans is to create a national, manufacturer-funded 'clearing house' that will provide free collection of unwanted electrical equipment from local waste management sites and special pickup points around the UK. The goods will be taken for treatment, recovery and recycling. Manufacturers will also be required to reclaim 4kg of waste per person, per household, per year from 31 August 04. Retailers, too, have obligations under the directive which demands shops provide return facilities for customers replacing obsolete products.

It is not yet clear how the money spent meeting WEEE's requirements will be recouped. Many firms are likely to opt for higher purchase prices and some will raise the costs of extended warranties. Whatever the method, we're willing to bet it will be consumers' wallets that feel the effects.

The proposals mark the launch of a consultation into the enforcement of the directive that will remain open until 1 March 04. Visit [www.dti.gov.uk](http://www.dti.gov.uk) for more information.



## Quick, it's the January sales!

Appreciating that most of us are suffering from Christmas-spending blues, a whole host of internet providers have released details of special offers and price reductions to encourage people to get online. Meanwhile BT has announced its pay-as-you-go wireless broadband offering, which it hopes will provide an alternative to expensive subscription fees.

### Broadband bargains

NTL is offering cut-price broadband content. Its Broadband Plus package will cost punters just £3.99 per month. NTL estimates the cost of downloading the included premium content separately would cost users in the region of £30. People who sign up before 1 March 04 will be able to experience the service free for the first three months. See Behind the news on page 26 for more details.

### Narrowband knockdowns

Freeserve is offering its AnyTime dialup service for £7.49 per month for the first three months - half the usual £14.99 price tag - for anyone who subscribes to the service before the end of January.

### Wireless wishlist

BT Openzone is to launch a pay-as-you-go option in a bid to kickstart consumer demand for broadband hotspot access. At £6 an hour, many consumers have so far been put off using BT's hotspots - found in hotels, airports, motorway stations and selected coffee shops. With the arrival of pay-as-you-go, customers wanting to check their email in the hotel lobby or over a cup of coffee without coughing up for an entire hour's worth can now do so.



Sadly an interoperable payment system between different hotspot suppliers isn't on the cards, says Steve Andrews, BT's retail managing director for products and enterprises. In other words, customers who take up a subscription with BT Openzone will be able to use hotspots at selected Costa Coffee outlets but will face a completely different payment system if they visit a Starbucks, which is supplied by BT rival T-Mobile.

Meanwhile BT Openzone is offering a week's worth of free surfing. From 26 January through to 1 February 04, anyone registering with BT Openzone will be given seven days of unlimited Openzone hotspot access free of charge.



## Return of the BlackBerry

Company RIM has unveiled its new and improved BlackBerry wireless email device. Unfortunately, it bears little difference to its predecessor - the most noticeable change is its larger screen that's grown from 2.5 to 2.9in. Network operator O2 will initially offer the triband BlackBerry 7730 in the UK before deciding if it will make the model available in other European countries.

Similar to the BlackBerry 7230, which is currently being rolled out in Europe by such operators as O2 and Vodafone, the colour-screened 7730 offers phone, email, SMS, browser and organisation features.

The BlackBerry 7730 will cost around £329, subject to the number of units ordered, with subscription costs set at an average of £56 per month.

## Fujifilm is looking fine

Fujifilm has launched the FinePix F610, the first compact digital camera to offer 6Mp (megapixels). The company has added its 4th Generation Super CCD HR sensor to the F610, allowing it to achieve a recorded output of 12Mp. This means users can enlarge images to unprecedented print sizes without loss of quality.

Successor to the popular FinePix F601, the F610 adopts the same upright format and builds on its performance and handling to create a camera ideal for photography enthusiasts. Feature-laden yet easy to use the FinePix F610 encourages experimentation while also offering automatic modes for the less confident user.

Whether you're a dab-hand at digital photography or a newcomer to the art, the FinePix F610's two LCD screens are



an excellent addition. The F610's designers have taken the innovative approach of displaying shooting information on one LCD screen, while devoting the primary 1.8in display to the image in question.



## Longhorn leaks

Pirates have already targeted code for Microsoft's much-hyped Longhorn OS. Almost a year before it's official launch date, illegal versions of the operating system have appeared on the Malaysian market for just £1.30.

Longhorn, when released in 2005, will improve the XP OS by altering its filing system, upping its security and making it more stable.

Malaysian authorities are taking an iron-fist approach to pirates, enforcing heavy fines. According to figures produced by the Business Software Alliance, 68 percent of all software sold in Malaysia is pirated - almost double the global average of 39 percent.



## The future's blue

In a bid to tackle the mountain of waste paper produced by Japanese offices, electronics giant Toshiba has developed so-called 'decolourable toner' that can be erased through heat treatment allowing offices to reuse paper. The chemical bonding in the dye breaks down under heat and pressure, reversing the reaction that occurs during printing.

The special ink is part of Toshiba's 'e-blue' range, which includes an erasing machine, photoconductor unit and decolourable inkpen. In order to remove the toner from the paper, offices will need to shell out around £100 for a decolourable cartridge and an erasing machine likely to cost between £200-£300, although prices have not yet been set.

The technology's success in Japan will determine whether the decolouring system ever makes it to European shores.