Web of support

Telephone technical support can be a slow, expensive process and won't necessarily solve the problem. Dominic Bucknall takes his troubles to the web in search of online alternatives to a long and tiresome wait on hold

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I f you've ever had to resort to calling a technical support 'hotline', you may well have encountered the public face of a very big problem. The classic bad technical support experience starts with an inordinately long wait while you are kept on hold, listening to a tape recorded voice telling you that your call is important to the company which, just a few months (or even a few short weeks) ago was so eager to take your money it gave you all the time in the world. Finally, a welcome human voice interrupts the canned music – and that's when the real trouble starts.

You explain the problem you are experiencing, do your best to answer every question about your system and try hard to follow the instructions given you over the phone – hoping all the while for the best. Unfortunately, the various attempts you make together to fix whatever might be amiss fail to do the trick. It's probably at this point that the company decides the trouble is being caused by something it did not supply and therefore has no responsibility for: another piece of software, a hardware fault, the operating system, a driver conflict… the list is long and comprehensive.

You are advised to call another company and, since you see little alternative, you grit your teeth and pick up the phone again. The canned music and recorded excuses start up on the other end of the line and an unpleasant sense of déjà vu creeps over you. This is very much the worst-case support nightmare, but it's the kind of experience that can and does occur, underlining the fact that calling technical support should really be the last thing you try, rather than the first.

Alternative approach

A substantial proportion of problems that regularly result in a call to technical support are actually quite simple to put right. In many cases you can resolve the issue alone, without needing to put yourself at the mercy of a company's technical support department.

An alternative is to look to the internet for support. Over the following pages, we'll explain how to access free advice from a global pool of fellow users and experts and direct you to sites where you can download patches and fixes that will, hopefully, set things running smoothly again.

Of course some faults require a physical repair and, invariably, this is best left to the engineers. However, the majority of computer troubles (about 80 percent) are caused by software, which is why it's often worth trying to tackle the problem yourself. Most

software problems can potentially be solved by the user, as long as you know what needs to be done. Screwdrivers and soldering irons need not come into it.

Once you are used to turning to the web for help, you may be pleasantly surprised at how much you can do on your own without recourse to the helpdesk. We aren't suggesting you'll be able to fix any problem at the drop of a hat, but if you have undertaken an amount of research it will certainly help the support engineers to pinpoint the source of the trouble rapidly.

The trouble with technical support

So why is there a perceived problem with telephone support? Why is it often agonisingly slow, sometimes ineffective and increasingly expensive to use? The simple answer is money. Technical support provision costs companies significant sums so, to keep costs down, they tend to limit the scale of their support to what can feel like the absolute minimum. Fewer staff means a longer time spent on hold, doodling the day away, waiting for someone to answer your call.

The cost of maintaining a support operation is also why a growing number of companies charge, sometimes heftily, for using their services. The current ailing state of the PC industry is likely to

↑ The Microsoft Knowledgebase offers a wealth of help and advice

→ You can scan through many categories of help and tips at 5 Star Support and email the experts if you are still stumped

↑ AskMe.com contains useful advice and information on a huge range of topics, including computing

increase the number of companies that put a price tag on helping their customers.

As if this weren't bad enough, support staff themselves may be bewildered by possible causes. With so many different machines of varying ages, running miscellaneous versions of Windows, with different software applications and device drivers installed, it can be almost impossible for them to pinpoint the source of the trouble. The buck-passing, it's-not-us-it's-them line that often emerges after a long, unsuccessful session trying to troubleshoot an elusive glitch can simply be the last resort of the terminally baffled.

What's the diagnosis?

Since so many computer-related problems can be easy to resolve if you know what to do, it seems obvious to ask for advice from other PC users who may have experience of the problem. This is where the internet comes in very useful. *PC Advisor*'s highly successful online helproom and discussion forums are proof of how sharing problems and expertise can benefit everyone.

But before you ferret around in cyberspace looking for assistance you need to try and determine what kind of problem you face since the quality of answers you receive will depend upon how clearly you explain the situation. (See the boxout *Troubleshooting basics* on page 163 for a quick guide to initial checks.) This is equally true of a call to technical

support, so if you eventually turn to the phone the time spent analysing the fault will not have been wasted.

If you think you have a software-specific problem, the first place to look is the relevant company's website – the URL will invariably be printed on the software box, in the documentation or in the Help files accompanying the offending package. Try the Help menu, usually in the 'About this product' section.

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Some software bugs are well known to the developer and, if you're in luck, a quick visit to the appropriate website for a patch will be all that's required.

Since most of us run Windows in one shape or form and use at least one Microsoft application, the Microsoft
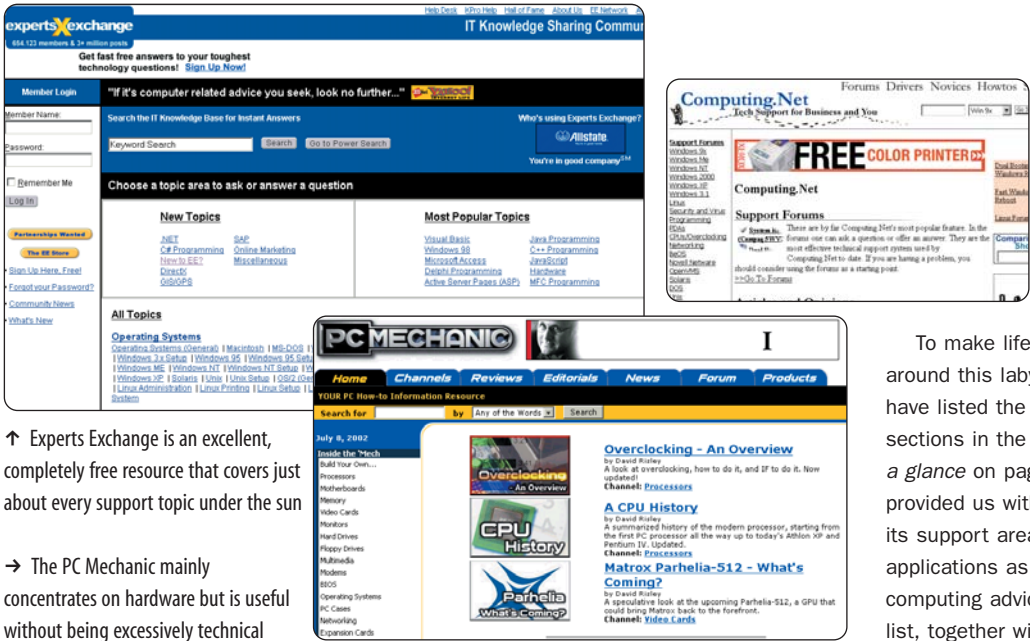
website (www.microsoft.com/uk) is likely to be a port of call at some point. Vast and sprawling though it is, Microsoft.com is the core resource for anyone having trouble with a Microsoft product. It's also where to go for the latest updates and enhancements for your software; it's not only when things go wrong that you need these downloads.

If you click the link to Support (situated in the bottom lefthand corner of the home page) it will take you to three sections of the site essential for effective self-help. These are the FAQ (frequently asked questions) library, the Knowledgebase and the Download Centre.

Start off by finding the relevant category in the FAQ library by typing in, say, Word 2000. Search for clues. Failing that, go to the Knowledgebase (a huge compendium of information compiled by Microsoft about its products) and try another search, especially if you have noted down a numbered error message. The error number can usually be used to find the relevant article; often the fix is a patch or update that you'll find at the Download Centre.

If you are having trouble locating a solution, the next place to try is the Newsgroups section. These are discussion forums devoted to a particular application or operating system version. Here you can explain your problem to fellow Microsoft users the world over. There's a strong likelihood that one of them will know how to fix your problem.

← Computing.net is a no-frills site with the emphasis firmly on its many operating system support forums

↑ Experts Exchange is an excellent, completely free resource that covers just about every support topic under the sun

→ The PC Mechanic mainly concentrates on hardware but is useful without being excessively technical

To make life easier when navigating around this labyrinthine website, we have listed the URLs for all the relevant sections in the boxout *Microsoft at a glance* on page 162. Microsoft also provided us with a list of quick links to its support areas for each of its Office applications as well as more general computing advice. You'll find this helpful list, together with further hyperlinks to the

The shape of things to come?

So far we've concentrated on what you can do with the web to help yourself. But, increasingly, prompted by the costs of conventional telephone support, the industry is itself turning to the web as a means of delivering support to its customers.

If you are running Windows 98 or Me, you can download a piece of software from the Microsoft site using the Windows Update feature on the Start menu. This will scan your system and tell you which patches and updates you should install. This information never leaves your PC, so you don't need to worry about Microsoft finding out too much about your computing setup.

Microsoft has taken this a step further with Windows XP, which has the facility to update automatically from the site, assuming your machine has internet access. Microsoft is also integrating online help more closely into all its software. The aim is that, when a problem occurs, you click on the Web Help button and are taken directly to the relevant articles in the Knowledgebase on the Microsoft site. This is a logical and welcome new dimension to the help on offer when things go awry. Eventually perhaps all major software packages will phone home when they get into difficulties.
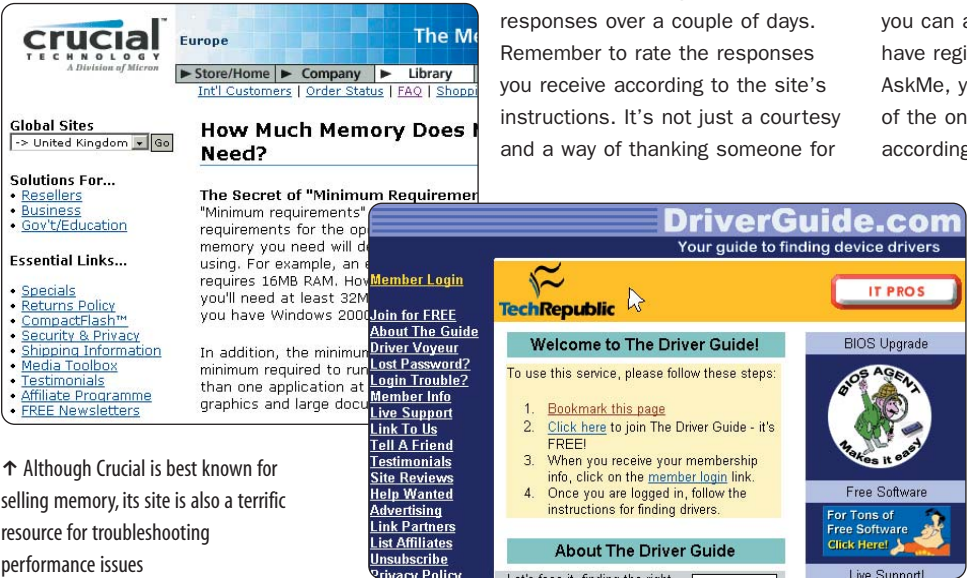
The web is also central to the vision of remote support specialist SupportSoft. The company's remote diagnosis software is now installed on all Sony's Vaio notebooks, IBM's ThinkPad portables and Netvista PCs as well as on the installation CDs for a number of broadband service providers. The idea is simple: if you encounter problems, press the Get Help button and the software takes you online to the Sony or IBM (or other manufacturer's) portal.

Once there, it homes in on the correct set of drivers and patches for your computer, using the model number of your machine to guide it to the right place. Meanwhile, software running on your system tries to identify the problem and, if it can do so, requests the appropriate fix in the form of new drives or an update or patch and downloads them while you wait. Companies can buy into a similar model and troubleshoot staff IT equipment remotely. If permission is granted by the end user, an intelligent agent can look at the PC setup and identify and fix problems.

Terry Lawlor, SupportSoft UK's head of marketing, claims remote support results in 20 percent fewer technical support calls and a 33 percent reduction in the duration of such calls. Faced with spiralling telephone support costs, it makes sense to be able to offer online assistance, either using a dynamic troubleshooting database or in an environment where a support technician can talk the user through the problem. Such a setup is not wholly dependent on the number of technicians available to answer calls; problems can therefore be dealt with efficiently, creating a favourable impression to the customer. Lawlor says 97 percent of customers who have used SupportSoft's self-service remote assistance would recommend it.

The aim of providing fast, efficient and probably free support over the web is laudable and, arguably, necessary to prevent the ever-increasing complexity of modern systems and software from dragging everything to a halt. The potential down side is, of course, that the backdoor into your system is open and could be abused by companies eager to gather data for their marketing activities. This would set everything back, possibly by several years, and we must hope the big names in IT continue to set a shining example as they develop what will probably be the future of technical support in the 21st century.

Microsoft at a glance

• Home page
www.microsoft.com/uk
• Windows
www.microsoft.com/uk/windows
• Windows Update
www.windowsupdate.com
• Office
www.microsoft.com/uk/office
• Home/home office
www.microsoft.com/uk/homepc
• Support directory
http://support.microsoft.com/directory
Newsgroups
http://communities.microsoft.com/home
Knowledgebase
http://search.support.microsoft.com/kb
Download centre
www.microsoft.com/downloads
FAQ directory
http://support.microsoft.com/directory
Call Microsoft support
www.microsoft.com/uk/support

↑ Although Crucial is best known for selling memory, its site is also a terrific resource for troubleshooting performance issues

↗ The Driver Guide offers over 70,000 downloadable drivers in its free archive and may well become an essential part of your PC toolkit

→ Pure Performance is aimed at getting the best out of your version of Windows and makes a good companion to Computing.net and the Microsoft site

other support sites mentioned here, by following the Magazine link to Print plus at www.pcadvisor.co.uk.

You only have to ask

Asking for informed or even expert help is always a good tactic and the good news is that the PC industry isn't the only source of such information. At a site such as 5 Star Support (www.5starsupport.com), a panel of technical staff provides free advice by email on all manner of PC troubles, usually within 24 hours. There's also a troubleshooting FAQ page you can browse for tips and links to other helpful sites that can offer further assistance. As always, whenever you submit a question you should try to be as accurate and detailed as possible in the information you provide.

We've found the best approach to canvassing support on the web is to use several sites rather than relying on a single one. You could try AskMe (www.askme.com) alongside 5 Star, posting your question on the appropriate forum and returning to check for responses over a couple of days. Remember to rate the responses you receive according to the site's instructions. It's not just a courtesy and a way of thanking someone for

You should rate the usefulness of the online responses to your question according to the site's instructions, so others may benefit from your experience

helpful advice; it also helps other users judge who out there is providing reliable and useful advice.

It's difficult to grade help sites such as these because the quality of advice depends on the questions you ask and who decides to answer them, but we've certainly had good results with Experts Exchange (www.experts-exchange.com). This is another large collection of forums devoted to specific aspects of hardware and software operation. As elsewhere, you can ask questions for free once you have registered with the site. As with AskMe, you should rate the usefulness of the online responses to your question according to the site's instructions, so other users may benefit from your experience.

Meanwhile, PC Mechanic (www.pcmech.com) provides a mix of articles, news and discussion forums where you can post queries about a wide array of topics relating to PC hardware and operating systems. The content is sometimes a bit long in the tooth but it is in the process of being updated and the well-populated forums are very much alive and kicking.

If you have a Windows issue you want to discuss, try the more operating system-specific Computing.net (www.computing.net). The site is based around support forums dealing with every version of Windows from 3.1 on. It also covers MS-DOS, Mac OS, Unix and OS/2, so there's something for everyone here. The site's How-to section is also worth a browse.

Windows can 'see' it and make use of the full range of features that it offers.

Like all software, drivers tend to be improved regularly and downloading and installing the latest driver for a particular component can sometimes eliminate a problem. Windows comes with a library of drivers which it can use to interface with most pieces of hardware, but manufacturers usually provide their own. These can sometimes work better than Microsoft's versions.

Problems with the Windows driver library frequently crop up if you upgrade from an older version of the operating system to Windows XP. After the upgrade it's not uncommon to discover that various parts of your system are no longer visible to Windows. If, say, your DVD-ROM drive, printer or modem has suddenly stopped working, you probably just need to get hold of the the latest drivers specifically designed for XP.

If you are in a tinkering mood, sites like these and the useful Pure Performance (www.pureperformance.com) can be equally good for hints on preventative maintenance and tweaking your system to get the best from it. Pure Performance is aimed at the moderately experienced user and, like Computing.net, is principally concerned with Windows, which it covers in detail from 95 to XP.

The site's Troubleshooting section is complemented by a forum for tips and tricks, each of which is rated by complexity and 'optimisation' – in other words, how much difference it could make to the performance of your system. There aren't thousands of tips on offer, but what you get is well chosen and potentially beneficial information, especially if you've had your PC for a couple of years and it needs a tuneup.

Safe drivers

Poor performance and the occasional crash can often be traced back to drivers (small bits of software that allow Windows to communicate with different pieces of hardware inside your machine). A graphics card, for example, needs a driver so that

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Troubleshooting basics

Before asking for advice in a support forum or calling technical support, you'll need to make sure you have some basic information about your PC to hand.

Gather information

1. **Note down any software error messages you receive, together with any error codes or numbers.**
2. **Check your manual and any Help files relevant to the misbehaving product. Look for the FAQ and Troubleshooting sections. Common problems can often be isolated and fixed without looking any further afield.**
3. **Note down the model number of your machine along with its vital statistics, such as its processor, memory, graphics card types and manufacturers and so on. Look in Control Panel, System, Device Manager if the manual doesn't tell you.**
4. **Note the version number of an application if it is giving problems. This is usually in the About section of the Help menu and is essential for troubleshooting.**
5. **Keep a written record of proceedings. Write down the history of the problem as accurately as you can, especially if you think it might have been triggered by something you did yourself. Keep notes of anything you do to try and rectify the problem.**

Common problems

1. **Check your system over for the obvious – loose connections and unplugged hardware are behind a surprising number of computer 'faults'.**
2. **Older PCs can become unstable because of insufficient memory or hard disk space. You really need a minimum of at least 64MB of RAM and 200MB or more free hard disk space.**
3. **Upgrading to Windows XP can cause parts of your system to stop working. The Windows XP driver library is not all it could be, and you probably need to download updated XP drivers for specific components.**
4. **Your PC's power button stops working after a crash. Some machines have a software-activated on/off switch which can fail after a Windows crash. When you press the button you need to hold it down for 20 seconds or more to override this.**
5. **You can't get online because your modem isn't responding. This is common enough; try turning its power off and back on again if it's an external modem or rebooting your PC if it's internal.**
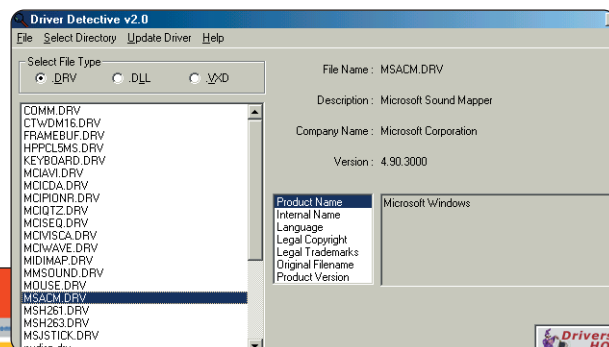
↑ AnandTech is aimed at a technical audience. It's one of the web's premier tech sites and its support forums are full of expert users from around the world

↑ The Driver Detective is a download away at The Drivers HQ site. It may be plain, but it's a handy tool for getting at the version numbers for all the Windows drivers on your system

← The *PC Advisor* site provides readers with news and a searchable archive of reviews, plus access to our Helproom where you can seek out advice on your computing problems

A lack of memory usually just makes everything run sluggishly, but it can sometimes cause system instability and crashes

Probably the best source for drivers on the internet is The Driver Guide (www.driverguide.com), which has a vast, searchable archive of more than 70,000 drivers. The site also includes help on finding and installing them and discussion forums where you can air problems and request obscure drivers from other users. Assistance is free; you simply have to register at the site.

This may all sound a bit esoteric but it can be an absolute lifesaver when you need it and we'd advise that you bookmark the site. Even if your system is behaving itself, periodic driver updates help keep everything performing at its peak.

Drivers HQ (www.drivershq.com) does pretty much the same thing as The Driver Guide, but includes the option of downloading a handy utility called Driver

Detective. This scans your system and generates a list of all driver files present, with the manufacturer's details and the all-important version number. Armed with this, determining which of your drivers are older than the versions offered in the online libraries is a snip. The download is about 2MB and should take between five and 10 minutes on most PCs.

Something else that can cause problems, particularly for anyone upgrading to Windows XP, is a lack of memory. Usually, this just makes everything run sluggishly, but it can sometimes cause system instability and crashes. To find out how your system measures up, try a visit to Crucial (www.crucial.com).

Crucial is a commercial site (it sells memory) but in addition stands up very well as a resource in its own right. Tables in the Library section detail exactly how much memory you should have installed to keep the various versions of Windows happy, as well as what you need for running popular applications, educational software and games.

If it looks like you are coming up short, you can use the Memory Selector tool on the site to determine exactly what type of memory you need for your system. There are several different types about these days and it's essential to get the right one. Fortunately, Memory Selector makes this a breeze. Armed

with a manufacturer and a model name, you can quickly establish whether you should be ordering PC2100 DDR non-parity SDRAM or not, without needing to get into what it all actually means. If your PC supplier is no longer in existence or you simply want to check a price, the Memory Selector can be invaluable.

Hardware problems

If you think you have a hardware fault or you are trying to find out more on a specific subject, such as which graphics chip is the current must-have for gamers, a couple of other sites are worth a visit. Turn your browser to the excellent AnandTech (www.anandtech.com) and Tom's Hardware (www.tomshardware.com) – the latter site being the less full-on technical of the two.

On both websites you will find news, industry analysis, product reviews and group tests, as well as discussion forums arranged by topic where you can seek help and advice on any hardware issue.

AnandTech provides a monthly-updated FAQ section that tends to be hit and miss. But it can be a goldmine. The content here and in the discussion forums (found in the Community section of the site) is generally technical and aimed at a technical audience, but this also means that you are in a great place to canvass the opinions of expert users from around the world. ∎