

readers' writes

We're still not doing enough to safeguard our personal data when we dispose of old PCs, and news from one Dutch reader suggests the situation is much the same in the rest of Europe: will the WEEE directive change that? And, for our star letter writer, not even a lilting Irish brogue can make up for his Bluetoothless existence



Dutch data

After reading *Dixons does it again* (News, May 02 issue), I just had to write a couple of words. Here in Holland people put their old PCs beside the garbage bin on the street. I've collected a couple of PC boxes for my cheap ethernet LAN [local area network] and did erase all of the data from the hard drives, but I couldn't resist peeking inside first. Not only were there private letters, but also PINs and other personal information. It seems that the average PC user is still not educated enough about data protection.

Goran Lambeski, via email

Wendy Brewer replies: data protection is your responsibility when you're throwing out an old PC; leaving it out by the dustbins and not wiping information from the hard drive is just asking for trouble. New provisions, in the guise of the recently passed WEEE (waste electrical and electronic equipment) directive, are coming into force, which means that soon we'll all be using rather different methods for disposing of our PCs.

WEEE dictates that, within the next two years, manufacturers and retailers will have to make provisions for recycling all electrical goods. While the directive doesn't make individuals' obligations so clear, already high street retailer Comet has a mobile phone recycling scheme and local council electronic wastebanks will probably become a familiar sight.

Fax chance

There is a perception, whether it is true or not, that faxed letters have no standing in law. For that reason, trying to resolve problems rapidly by using this method may be doomed to failure. Most companies regard faxes simply as advance notice and will wait for a 'proper' letter to follow before any action is taken.

Email is even less reliable. Companies are flooded with casual and only 'half-serious', time-wasting correspondence. Large companies may well have emails fielded by a call centre which regards all emails as falling within the same category.

Small companies might not check their email daily. It seems that the best readers can do is always to make it clear to whom

an email is directed. If your program does not provide an automatic facility to request an acknowledgement, you should not forget to include this request in the text.

Secure links via web-mail may be more reliable but first-class recorded delivery snail mail is still the best way of substantiating delivery of any document that may ultimately form a part of legal proceedings.

John Kirkup, via email

Guy Dixon replies: faxes have as much standing in law as letters, but are notorious for going 'astray'. Emails, again, should stand up in a court of law, but don't carry the same perceived importance as traditional mail. Letters sent via recorded or special delivery, crucially addressed to a 'decision maker' – preferably the name of the customer services manager or managing director – still carry the most impact.

Email is a useful and much cheaper way of checking that procedures have been set in motion. In all cases keep a record of your communication with the company in question. If you make a phone call, make a note of who you spoke to, what was discussed and the exact time and date.

Quids in again

At the risk of starting a chain letter, I must thank Paul Milne, Allan Paterson and yourselves (Readers' writes, May and June 02). The letters and results are the same except my printer is an Epson Stylus Color 740. This begs the question – how many printers have been needlessly binned? Many thanks, all of you.

David Murray, via email

Broadband soapbox

Is BT ever going to wake up from its lumbering giant's sleep? Broadband will never take off until the price is right. If Europe can deliver broadband for £10

Star letter

For any of you expectant Bluetoothers just salivating at the thought of a wireless world, think again. I have just purchased a new laptop with XP and Bluetooth built in and a new Bluetooth wireless printer. Frankly, 'plug and pray' now looks a more desirable option.

This morning, after hours of frustrating problems, the printer manufacturer explained to me that it currently only supports Bluetooth cards supplied by Xircom for its printer, and I wasn't sure the lady I spoke to about my laptop even knew what Bluetooth was, although she did have a lovely Irish accent.

When is the IT industry going to get its act together? We wouldn't accept this incompatibility from any other industry yet we continue to be ripped off by so-called 'improvements' in IT hardware that frankly never live up to the press releases. All I want is compatibility with no strings attached. Is that too much to ask?

Gordon Smith, via email

Rupert Collins-White replies: sadly, no matter the hype, Bluetooth is still, for us mortals, a nascent technology. But that really is no excuse. Bluetooth is supposed to be an open standard and it's perfectly possible to make systems that can talk to (almost) any other Bluetooth device. A company that ties its new Bluetooth devices to only one firm's cards comes dangerously close to a micro-cartel in my opinion. Or laziness. Or short-sightedness. Take your pick.

Our star letter writer wins an IBC Pontis SP600 MP3 player worth £175 inc VAT. This ultra-portable device offers 4GB memory capacity, so you can enjoy up to 66 hours of CD-quality music. For more details, see www.ibt-ltd.co.uk or call 01344 752 700.

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per month, so can the UK. The technology isn't new, there is no multimillion pound investment needed to obtain broadband. The phone lines could take broadband before we had computers in vast numbers. TV signals can be transmitted along phonelines at the same time; the capacity is already there. I will gladly buy the box to access the technology. Why do we have to pay through the nose for everything? I'll tell you why: money, the big buck, filthy lucre. Wake up Joe Public, vote with your wallet or your feet.

I am not paying over the odds for anything any more, I am going to hold out for a reasonable price. Not just for broadband, for satellite and digital TV, petrol, cars, mobile phone call charges, the list is endless.

Who will join me? It will only take a few thousand of us a couple of weeks to make things change. I can hold out for months and I will. I have lived through

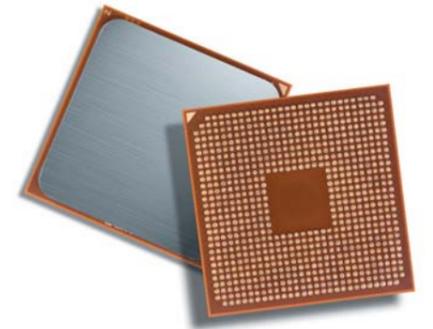
hard times and done without for many years. My father taught me to save up for something if you wanted it, this makes you very aware of the value of the product and gives you time to shop around. Will anyone else out there join me?

M Gamble, Lancs

Emma Northam replies: you're quite right that broadband's still too pricey in the UK, but OfTel's regulation of it means BT can't actually reduce the price to a more palatable £15 per month because that would be judged anticompetitive behaviour. It would be interesting to see if, free from the beady eye of OfTel, BT's powers that be would actually choose to make broadband more affordable.

Number cruncher

Having decided that I needed to invest in a new PC, I went through all the usual tortments about processor speed, hard



disk size and so on. This time I plumped for an AMD Athlon 1600+ on the basis that I did not need anything faster for the applications that I run. Naturally, this decision was based on the assumption that '1600+' represented the CPU speed; why would it be otherwise?

When I ran a couple of system information utilities, however, both showed the clock speed to be 1,400MHz. Not quite what I was expecting, so I took it up with my supplier. Their reply was this extract from AMD's website: "The AMD Athlon 1600+ is a model number given to the processor by AMD, and is not an indication of true clock speed. This approach is designed to provide an indication of the processor's relative performance compared to other CPUs in the market. It is correct that the processor is running at a clock speed of 1,400MHz."

Now, call me old-fashioned, but I think that this is more than a bit misleading. Let's face it, if you bought a car described as an 1800LX you would have a legitimate grievance if it transpired that the engine size was only 1599cc. It is hard to see why a different set of standards should apply to the marketing of processors for PCs.

Roger Turner, via email

Spencer Dalziel replies: when AMD announced this number-based styling initiative/marketing slogan, the sound of groans could be heard emanating from many an IT publishing house. However, in the fullness of time we began to see that the new Athlons outperformed anything Intel put forward. Our lab results suggest a 1600+ processor from AMD – running at 1.4GHz – will give a much better performance than a 1.6GHz processor from Intel. ■