

letters

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The Editor
Personal Computer World
VNU House
32-34 Broadwick Street
London W1A 2HG

or email > letters@pcw.co.uk

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A CRY FOR HELP

I have discovered for myself why screaming.net has been so named. The brochure made it look wonderful — free access plus free phone calls all evening and weekend. Indeed, switching to LocalTel would make my normal calls 10 percent cheaper than before. I rely on a call redirection service on my phone line, so I thought I would add it to my LocalTel account. I emailed and faxed them, but nothing

happened. I tried to call but they were engaged.

Using my other phone line I set up a callback arrangement, expecting to be contacted once the line was free. Days went by and still the line was 100 percent engaged.

Eventually I thought I'd try going online to the web site to see if there was anything I could do, but I could not get online using screaming.net. My local branch of Tempo could not help as it was not the provider and it too had trouble getting through.

I phoned Tempo, but the excuses were well rehearsed: 'We were not expecting such a rush of people', 'we have been held to ransom by BT not switching accounts fast enough', etc. Considering the market and the benefits of free phone calls, the numbers argument is unacceptable — especially

as they gave out 100,000 CD-ROMs in the first place.

Presumably, following my call to Tempo, someone, somewhere passed the message to LocalTel. So I had a message on my mobile asking me to call back on one of two numbers if I needed to contact anyone for help at LocalTel.

I tried the three numbers for a further 12 hours and gave up. I cancelled my account, and never once managed to get online with screaming.net.

PAUL STEWART
www.Passg60.co.uk

Clive Akass replies > *Oftel is investigating screaming.net's complaint that BT has been slow to transfer accounts to LocalTel. screaming.net says this delay has led to its line being jammed by complaint calls. See this month's News section.*

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Everything in its place

In his *Hands On Windows* column, Tim Nott made one of the most sensible statements I have ever seen in a computer magazine: 'Why partition? Well, the secret of successful disk management is to divide and rule. It makes eminent sense to keep volatile data, such as your work, mail, template and customisation files, away from files that don't change.'

This statement should be put up over the desk of every software writer, if not burned into their brains at birth. It is true that many programs give the opportunity to place work files at a destination of choice (although there are notable exceptions), but how many allow you to save the rest of the variable files to other locations? I have taken this up on numerous occasions with support staff and you can tell by their answers why this is not so:

'There is no provision in the program' — We never thought of it.

'We don't recommend it' — We tried it and the program fell over.

'We don't support it' — We thought we had it licked, but someone tried it and it fell over and took so long to fix that we can't be bothered.

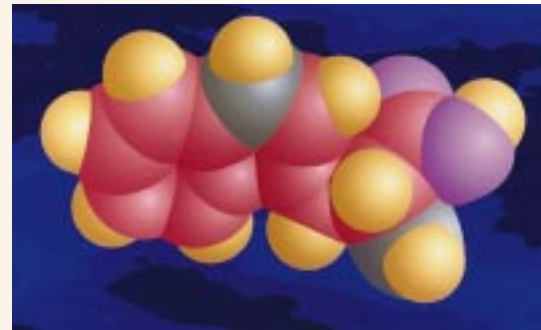
'It may/will be in the next version of the program' — We're fed up with people asking for the feature, so we may include it the next version of the program which will cost you a lot of money, especially if we fix all the other bugs.

'Windows won't let us enable the feature' — When all else fails, blame Microsoft.

At other times, I have asked where configuration files are stored so that I can back them up. Answers range from 'we're not telling you' to 'if you knew, you could examine them and we don't want you to do that'.

I feel very strongly that any program should have these features and that they should be user configurable.

DAVID DEVON
Devon@dircon.co.uk



MINI-SCHOOL SIZES UP THE MEDIA ARGUMENT

Paul Smith's argument that MiniDiscs would be a great alternative to Zip disks if it weren't for the lack of a PC drive for them, doesn't hold water [*'Out of Site', PCW August 1999*]. Sony



tried and failed with a drive around 10 years ago, before they had to compete with Zip disks or LS120 floppies. Nowadays, there is no realistic chance for MiniDiscs in this field. Even if they were cheaper, the vast numbers of Zip drives now in circulation means that MiniDiscs would need an overwhelming price/convenience advantage to stage a comeback, and it doesn't have either.

You say that MiniDiscs are one fifteenth the price of Zip disks. Well, the typical street price of Zip disks is £6-£7. If you can get MiniDiscs at a retail price of around 40p each as you imply, please let me know where (while stocks last!).

Don't get me wrong, I have no downer on MiniDiscs as such: they are excellent for what they were primarily intended — a compact, recordable alternative to audiocassettes and CDs. I have had several MiniDisc players, and I love them, but I don't see the need for a PC drive. With the digital output from a soundcard, is it really such a hardship to have a little optical cable leading out the back of the PC for plugging into your MiniDisc when required? It's also more flexible in that you

don't tie the MiniDisc unit to a specific PC.

The good-quality little portable MiniDisc recorder/players have direct optical input (usually via the same jack as the line-in analogue connection) and are compatible with the output from the soundcard or CD drive with suitable output. I also feed mine from the optical output jack on the back of my (fairly bog-standard) Pioneer midi-system CD unit. The results are as good as they can be, and there is the added advantage of automatic recording sync with no clipping of starts or ends of tracks.

If you had a dedicated PC drive, you would still need a portable player to enjoy the recordings; the one fixed to the PC would be idle a lot of the time.

What do you reckon — have I convinced you?

ALEX GRAY
alex.gray@mail.com

Paul Smith replies > *Pah! First of all we need to separate the two possible uses, audio and data. Sure, MiniDisc is great for audio, but I was really interested in the data possibilities. Sony failed at the first attempt with its drive because it priced itself out of the market, but now that MiniDisc is prevalent and, pound per megabyte, a lot cheaper than Zips, why shouldn't it be used as a data device? Then you could store things on cheaper MiniDiscs and also make digital recordings for use on cheaper playback-only MiniDisc players. As for price, you buy your Zips for a lot less than I've seen them, but however you calculate it, the price per megabyte is very attractive for MiniDiscs.*

CHIP IN TO HELP

I read the letter from Jim Birrell in the August issue of *PCW* and feel that the reply from Intel was not very helpful. They failed to point out that a device called a 'bridge' is available, which fits into Slot 1 and has a Socket 370 on it. This allows you to fit any Socket 370 Celeron into a Slot 1 motherboard.

As for the point made about the motherboard speed, I cannot think of any BX-based motherboard that cannot be set to 66 or 100MHz, either by jumper settings or through the BIOS, and they can be set to speeds between these and over the 100MHz for overclocking purposes.

Insight, which advertises in *PCW*, have two bridgicards in their catalogue. These can be found under the Motherboard Accessories section on page 9.

If you do buy a Celeron and a Slot 1 motherboard, make sure you buy 100MHz memory as you will be able to use it when you upgrade at a later date.

JOHN MEHEW
jmehew@mgn.co.uk

● See *PCs group test*, page 134

CALL FOR FREE SERVICES

I write regarding Paul Smith's column, 'Out of Site', in the July 1999 issue of *PCW*. While a lot of it makes very good common sense, both in business and economic terms, he appears to have overlooked one crucial fact: BT are legally prevented from offering free calls by Oftel and the MMC.

However, other companies that provide phone services are not bound by these restrictions. Therefore, if you

want unmetered local calls, your best bet is to change your telephone provider from BT to one that is allowed to offer such services. The only way that this can be changed is if the law is relaxed.

JOHN BARNETT
john@jrbarnett.freeserve.co.uk



THE MISSING MULTILINK

In the comms hardware group test in the August 1999 issue of *PCW*, it says, on page 190, that multilink ISDN is not available on many tenner-a-month ISPs. While Demon does, actually, offer it (unsupported and, frankly, flaky at the best of times) you can get multilink ISDN free from the most unlikely of sources: FreeServe. Which kind of makes sense if you think how they make their money.

JAMES CRIDLAND
james007@mediauk.com

Corrections

♦ The URL for Imerge, mentioned in Brian Clegg's Business Matters column last month should have read www.imerge.co.uk.

♦ The URL for the BBC news site on last month's ChipChat page should have been news.bbc.co.uk, not www.news.bbc.co.uk as stated.