

Radio Days – 2012-02-11

Tip of the Week – Wrong Program

This week I had calls from two clients who could not get a file to open in the correct program. This is a common occurrence so I thought that it was time to bring it up on this program.

Most people are used to clicking (or double-clicking) on a file and expecting their file to open in the appropriate program. There were two instances where this did not happen to my clients.

- Clicking a link in an email usually opened a web page in a web browser. For one client nothing happened. I checked that her web browser was set as the default web browser and there was no default browser. After trying to fix the problem I downloaded and installed a new copy of the browser from the internet and everything worked. I do not know why the problem occurred but that is part of the job.
- My second client had backed-up his accounting data files to his USB stick then clicked on these files to check that the backup had been done correctly. The program that opened was Adobe Acrobat Reader, and this is not the correct program to open any accounting data file. The only thing to do here was to open Windows Explorer and use the settings there to create to correct association for the accounting data file.

In both cases a small change in their computer's settings made a big difference to my clients. Are you putting-up with a badly behaving computer just because you do not know how to make the necessary changes?

Next-Generation Internet

In the dim dark ages of being online to other computers I was the proud possessor of a dialup connection. This was bliss. I could spend one hour a day checking all sorts of information, and all for the cost of a local phone call plus a monthly bill to the Melbourne PC User Group. The speed was a fantastic 9,600 bps (bits per second). By comparison, my current access speed is 1,500,000 bps, over 100 times faster.

Most people would assume that this was as fast as a connection should get. As was said when cars first appeared on our roads: *All this speed will kill us very quickly!*

Dialup Internet Access

Then the inevitable happened: the technology for accessing other computers became faster. First we had 14,400 bps, then 28,800 bps then a magnificent 36,000 bps! My last connection was at the fastest speed available, even today, for dialup connections: 52,200 bps. This was almost too fast for my tiny brain to comprehend. I remember going to a computer show at Melbourne's Exhibition Building and laughing when a Telstra representative stated that Telstra would only guarantee connecting at 28,800 bps because the telephone lines could not take faster speeds!

As an aside, in days of yore the federal government guaranteed a minimum dialup speed of 19,200 bps. This speed is both painfully slow and below a reasonable speed for telephone lines, and it shows Telstra's complete contempt for its users. It was, however, very useful in getting a decent telephone service to a number of my clients in the past. This guaranteed minimum level of service is no longer available due to lack of demand.

In the olden days you could access all the data on MelbPC's internal computers. The only way to access other computers was to have an account at these other providers and make a phone call to each provider. This was an expensive way to do things, and what made it even more frustrating was that these other computers only duplicated what you had on the MelbPC computers! These MelbPC computers, and all the other computers in the network, were updated each night (at dialup speeds) with all the new information which had appeared during the previous day.

Then the internet arrived in the early 1990s. This was a vast improvement on the previous system because you could access many computers with only one telephone call and you could stay online for up to four (yes *four!*) hours. By today's standards the web browsers were appalling as were the web sites themselves. There was, as usual, a silver lining to all this cloud: the amount of available information had increased. This was the start of something.

The arrival of the internet spawned a lot of activity by many large organisations. How many of us can remember the AOL (America On-Line) CDs which appeared on the cover of many magazines? How many of us can remember the arrival of Windows 95 and Bill Gates' attempt to make Microsoft the only way to access the internet?

Fortunately the internet survived, unlike Bill Gates' attempt to commandeer it. This attempt has, as its legacy, MSN (Micro-Soft Network) and the awful Internet Explorer web browser. We were still left with the slow dialup access speeds: they did not improve until the advent of ADSL for those who lived close enough to a telephone exchange to access the web using this technology. Then, for those in remote areas, satellite and mobile internet access made the internet available to everybody at broadband speeds, more or less.

Broadband Internet Access

At the time that broadband made its appearance I was a reseller for Hotkey internet services. Like all ISPs at the time, Hotkey provided both dialup and broadband internet access. Hotkey would allow me to resell broadband services only if I had a broadband connection for myself. This was an excellent condition.

I had not realised just how important this condition was until I started to use broadband at home. With dialup access, getting on to the internet involved connecting using a modem (a process which could easily take a minute) then, once the connection was established, loading a web browser to start the search. With broadband, in contrast, the connection is always there and often my web browser is open so it is just a matter of accessing the website.

I have surprised many clients new to the always-on nature of broadband when I use their computer to access information quickly. For example, using the white pages website to find a phone number and address (with a map of the location, if needed) is much quicker than ringing the Telstra number and forcing your way past the computer "assistant". Also, using the internet, you can access many phone numbers in the one sitting instead of having to ring for each number. Such contempt for its customer has Telstra.

With so many websites like google, google maps, white pages, yellow pages and Wikipedia (and, of course, WikiLeaks) available at the click of a mouse I have found that my browsing is an immediate response to a need for information. When I was a schoolboy I remember one of my far-sighted teachers stating that the most useful person in the future would not be the person who knew everything but would be the one with the best access to information. The person who knows the most would, my teacher stated, be out of date quickly because of the rate of change in knowledge. The most useful person would be the person who could find accurate information quickly.

This ease of searching for knowledge improved massively with the introduction of broadband internet access. I had not realised just how much my use of the internet would change when I started using broadband instead of the snail-like dialup modem.

I remember getting my first mobile phone in 1997. I was just going to use it for making phone calls: nothing else. Now, with my latest phone, I use it both to access the internet and as a general source of information. In fact, when I am outside the coverage area of my telco, I find that I can be at a great loss.

How ever did we manage in the days before mobile phones and before computers?

The Future: High-Speed Broadband

All this leaves me wondering just how our internet usage will change when we get the high-speed NBN (National Broadband Network). According to media speculation, we will use the high speed aspect of this network to download movies and TV shows in record time. Just as the current internet access methods allow us to view (sometimes jerky) movies on YouTube, the suggestion is that we will do more of the same. This is the same-old same-old, and I expect that new uses for the extra capacity will appear in quite unexpected ways.

This opening-up of new technology has been a feature of our society ever since the rate of change started to overwhelm more and more people. We see people losing their jobs because of changes in companies and in the environment. We see people starting in new jobs as the technology around them changes the way in which companies operate and, indeed, the way new companies start and grow. The world is full of change.

Not only will the NBN, with its faster internet access, provide yet another disruptive influence which may cost some jobs it will also provide us, again because of its disruptive influence, with yet another leap forward in wealth. This has been the way since the beginning of time:

- Farming relieved us of the problems of hunting and gathering
- Industrialisation allowed us to move to the cities for greater opportunities
- The invention firstly of the transistor, then of the integrated circuit, allowed us to create previously unimaginable technology. Imagine the world today without mobile phones and computers (if you can!).

This is what we can look forward to: an exciting new world with new, and more interesting, jobs for those who are prepared to move beyond the humdrum of boring. Bring it on!

Further Information

White pages	www.whitepages.com.au
Yellow pages	www.yellowpages.com.au
Google	www.google.com.au
Google maps	www.maps.google.com
Wikipedia	www.wikipedia.org
WikiLeaks	www.wikileaks.org
YouTube	www.youtube.com
NBN Co	www.nbnco.com.au