

# NATGUG News November December 2007

## Editorial

Have you booked in for the next Computer Week-End?

We Need every one to book now because of the very small number booked in for the November meeting, unfortunately if we are unable to get the numbers up we have just had our last meeting, PLEASE SUPPORT US AND LETS HAVE ANOTHER MEETING

## PLEASE

At the time of writing this I have not booked the Hotel I hope they will allow us to book again, I will be in touch with the result of my negotiations when I have something to report, If you do intend to come will you please let me know so I have some bargaining power.

## Tech News

by Sue Crane  
The Big Bear Computer Club  
[www.bbcc.org](http://www.bbcc.org)

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The search engine wars get more interesting by the week. Google is partnering with some of the world's most prestigious universities to make it easier for Web users to scan the schools' vast library holdings. The collaboration of Google and research institutions

that include Harvard, the University of Michigan, Stanford and the New York Public Library is a major stride in an ambitious Internet effort. The goal is to expand the Web beyond its current valuable body of material and create a digital card catalogue and searchable library for the world's books, scholarly papers and special collections.

Meanwhile, Yahoo is adding local traffic information to its maps service, including roadwork and accident reports as well as the approximate speed at which traffic is proceeding along specific roads. The service, part of Yahoo Maps, will offer accident reports and road construction information for about 70 U.S. metropolitan areas. The service will also provide driving speed information for about 22 of those areas. The traffic information is layered on top of a map at the user's request. Icons are used to indicate accidents or construction, while colour codes are used for the speed information. And America On Line is testing a Web-based e-mail service that will compete with Yahoo Mail, Microsoft's Hotmail and Google's Gmail. The beta service for America Online's free Web-based e-mail is available to AOL subscribers only. But it will eventually be offered to the public for free.

With a floating screen, Mitsubishi's Scopo due next year will truly be a portable computer!. This headset with an eye-sized, eye-level LCD creates the illusion that a 10-inch display is in front of the viewer. The Scopo comes with a belt-carried unit with a CPU to process images and video. It can be attached to a cell phone, video player, or other device.

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Two Japanese companies, Toshiba and Memory-Tech, say they've developed the world's first DVD that can be played on both standard and high-definition DVD players, using the HD-DVD format. HD-DVD has the backing of the DVD Forum.

You can get anything on eBay -- except justice. That's what one disgruntled litigant found when she snarkily offered a New York City judge for sale on the popular auction site. Even though the highest bidder offered more than \$100, she found out the hard way that crime just doesn't pay. And the judge was not amused.

Residents of 13 western states can check all three of their credit reports for free at [AnnualCreditReport.com](http://AnnualCreditReport.com). The Midwest will come on stream on March 1, the South on June 1, and the East on Sept. 1. Previously, you had to buy this information from the three credit reporting companies: TransUnion, Experian and Equifax. The three reports can vary. That's why all three, and not just one, are available. Check your credit report on-line at: <https://www.annualcreditreport.com/cra/index.jsp>

The California Energy Commission unanimously approved standards to be phased in beginning in 2006 that would require household appliances including televisions, VCRs, DVD players and cell phone chargers, to run on one to three watts. Even when idle, such appliances now typically gobble up two to 10 watts. Commissioners estimate that compliance with the new guidelines will save commercial and residential power

customers more than \$3 billion over 15 years.

iBrattleboro.com is at the forefront of Web publishers delivering local news. What's [new] is that they are relying on local residents. The idea is that citizen-generated content lowers costs and creates more loyal audiences. One intriguing experiment started in May when the Bakersfield Californian launched a community Web site called the Northwest Voice ([www.northwestvoice.com](http://www.northwestvoice.com)). The site has no paid writers except for a lone editor. It employs only four people full-time, gets most of its content from readers. Last month, the J-Lab Institute for Interactive Journalism at the University of Maryland announced a \$1 million grant program to fund what it calls "micro-local" Web news experiments around the country. Funded by the Knight Foundation, each initial grant will amount to \$12,000 and go to nonprofit groups creating community news sites.

Microsoft is setting an example for customers as they introduce a second security measure for their internal networks: smart cards for every employee. By the end of 2005, tens of thousands of telecommuting Microsoft employees will be issued the cards, which will be required to log on to the company's networks.

President Bush signed a new four-year ban on state and federal taxation of Internet connections. The latest version of The Internet Tax Nondiscrimination Act expands the original dial-up definition of access to include DSL, cable modems and wireless Internet connections. The bill blocks states

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from differentiating for tax purposes between dial-up and broadband hookups.

Intel's products for the digital home and digital office in 2005 will give consumers and IT managers more capabilities than just raw performance, and the company plans to highlight those products. Earlier this year, Intel cancelled two single-core desktop and server designs and announced plans to accelerate the development of dual-core processors. Intel is planning to design and market its desktop processors in platforms, similar to the way the company brought the Pentium M processor, a new mobile chipset and new wireless capabilities to customers as part of the Centrino platform. Intel expects to bring 64-bit capabilities to its desktop processors in the first half of 2005 (Microsoft's 64-bit Windows XP operating system is scheduled to ship in the first quarter of next year). In 2006, Intel will bring out the Bridge Creek and Averill platforms for the digital home and digital office. These platforms will feature Intel's security and virtualisation technologies that it highlighted at recent Intel Developer Forum conferences. Microsoft's next update to the Windows operating system, code-named Longhorn, will be required to take advantage of the hardware-based security and virtualisation technologies that Intel plans for 2006.

A report from U.S. Pharmacopoeia (USP), a nonprofit group that sets standards for the drug industry, says that as more hospitals have implemented automated systems for administering drugs, the number

of errors associated with them has risen. Kenneth Kizer of the National Quality Forum says: "Technology offers great opportunity to reduce errors, but it's not a panacea. You can't just throw a computerised system in and expect that everything's fixed. It has to be done right. The technology is only as good as the people who use it."

Microsoft next year plans to host its first developers conference dedicated to the Microsoft Office System, underscoring the company's strategy to make Office a foundation for customised business applications. The conference will take place Feb. 2 through 4 in Microsoft's home town of Redmond, Wash., and will feature Microsoft chair Bill Gates as its keynote speaker. The company said Monday that it expects about 800 developers from independent software vendors, consulting partners and corporate customers to participate.

## **Unwired Connection to the Internet**

by Owen E. Edmonds -- SYDTRUG

[Reprinted from the 2005 May issue of "SYDTRUG News", newsletter of SYDTRUG Inc., PO Box 75, PANANIA NSW 2213, AUSTRALIA]

I have changed my connection to the Internet by using a wireless modem supplied by a firm called Unwired. I have been a subscriber to a dial up service for some years, and with them I was given a certain amount of time to be connected per month. Over the time, I have bought different modems and have

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increased my connection speed several times, but dial up is slow by some comparisons. When I found an advertisement to get a wireless modem for free (\$190.00) (just pay \$6.00 for postage), free setup if I signed on for 12 months (300Mbytes per month for just over \$30.00 per month) I decided to have a go at an upgrade to my connection.

The parcel arrived quite promptly. Included with the modem was a plugpack power supply, connection cable (Ethernet in my case but usb also available), and CD with the set-up program(s). From there, unpack, plug in, and away I went. Run set-up, position modem to get better signal, sign up on-line, and get on-line with a new account taking only minutes.

I have been using this set-up for about three months with no problems of note. My initial modem placement I found could be affected by others walking in the room, but relocation by about 4 feet to a window ledge (recommended location) fixed that. Speed came up from 4Kbits to 23Kbits on longer files. Like all Internet connections, speed varies depending on current usage, so I suppose expansion in both users and equipment [will] cause some variations.

So far I have not suffered a dropout or broken connection.

Subsequent to my signing up, my limit has been increased to 400Mbytes/month at no extra charge. For about \$5 per month I could increase my limit to 1Gbyte. A new 64Kbit service at about \$16.00 per month is available. In

the event that I go over my monthly limit the speed is capped to 64Kbits for the rest of the month, but they are sending me e-mails to let me know how much I have used during the month. There is also a facility to buy extra download in one month. Unwired provides plans for shorter periods and larger download limits.

These notes have been written just to let other members know of my experience. I would be happy to recommend the Unwired service to other SYDTRUG members, as would I recommend my previous ISP, Rivernet. At the time of writing, March 2005, I think Unwired is only available in the Sydney area. It is possible from any Internet connection to call up Unwired, where one can view the areas of coverage on a map.

Since writing the above, I found that the three computers networked together, all running different versions of Windows, were not speaking to each other, a common trait of these computers. They were plugged into a powered hub, along with the Unwired modem. Switching to a powered router with a separate modem port they began to communicate nicely. I do not know whether it was the change from hub to router, or just giving the computers some attention. Computers, like cars, are sometimes difficult to deal with, so while they are going well, do not tinker with them.

## **How I Made a Movie**

by Chuck Guion, Editor

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Rockport Computer Users' Group,  
Inc.  
[www.rcug.net](http://www.rcug.net)

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Many of our club members saw Patty Beasley's movie that she made on Joe Files. She used Windows Movie Maker 2 (WMM2) to make it. I thought I would also create some movies. Patty gave me some hints on how she made her movie. One very helpful tip she gave me was to first create your movie in PowerPoint and save each slide as a JPG. You can add text, templates, etc. while you are in PowerPoint. Another way to make a movie is to use WMM 2.1. (You don't have to use PowerPoint; you can use Video Effects, Video Transitions, and add text within the program.)

If you haven't downloaded XP's Service Pack 2, then you should download and install it since WMM Version 2.1 is included. Open up WMM 2.1 and make a Collection (import all of your slides from PowerPoint into the Collection). Start a New Project and drag the slides into Storybook View. Import a music file (MP3) from Windows Media Player (download Version 10 from [www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia](http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia) and install it) and drag it to the far left in Timeline View. You can also use a microphone to narrate your movie. But you

cannot narrate and play music at the same time.

You can play the Storybook and Timeline and shorten your music by moving the corner arrow to the left and cutting it off. You can add Transitions and Video Effects in the Timeline View (in WMM 2.1). You can also lengthen the time your slide stays on the screen. If you want to take a break, you can give your project a name and save it.

When you are satisfied with your movie you can save it as a WMV file in My Videos or put it on a CD. The music files are large so you may want to save them on a CD.

You can bring video clips into WMM 2.1 and add them to your movie. You can also take slides from Digital Video Recorders and bring them into WMM 2.1 but you may have to buy a special video card to get your Analogue and Digital recorders to work with WMM 2.1.

Windows Movie Maker has the usual help files but you might [want] to go to for more help on using WMM 2.1.

I have made several movies for the CAUG DigiCam SIG and have also made some on architecture, boats, and birds. WMM 2.1 is a good way to make a family movie. Gather old pictures, cards, poems, etc., scan them, and bring them into WMM 2.1. You can also record your children and grandchildren's voices and put them in the movie. The possibilities are endless. Why don't you try making a movie? It's a lot of fun!

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## Configuring a Basic User's PC

by Gabe Goldberg

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Don't be alarmed by the highfalutin word "configuring". It just means deciding what components -- otherwise called "parts" -- will perform various PC functions. It's like old-days car buying: reviewing a dealer checklist to pick dozens of individual features, from radio to power steering to disc brakes and more.

The good news is that almost any current PC with a printer and Internet connectivity will handle mainstream requirements. That means that a generic Windows PC is usually adequate -- but you should upgrade if you'll do anything challenging or exotic.

Just as when buying a car, the first step in buying a computer is deciding what you'll do with it: e-mail, Web searching/viewing, word processing ? Financial work with Quicken ? Digital photography ? Simple games ? Ultra-demanding tasks like high-end games and digital video editing ?

Just as when making any major purchase, a small investment in learning pays off for years. Before buying a PC, learn the basics: -- take a class, buy a book, attend local computer user group meetings, consult Web sites, read

technology magazines at the library.

As you look at applications' system requirements (processor speed, RAM size, hard drive storage capacity, video card speed and memory, etc.) note differences between minimum and recommended specifications. Vendors are often too optimistic -- and that's being charitable -- about what's needed for their software to run productively. It's much safer, and not much more expensive, to buy at least the recommended choices. In fact, I usually buy a little more power than I need. This bumps cost just a little and it avoids future problems and upgrades. Purchasing this way greatly extends a PC's life and makes it more compatible with future innovations, at least for a while.

Remember that as PCs evolve, a range of choices is always available, from bleeding-edge new to borderline obsolete. An equally valid -- and more economical -- approach to configuring is finding the current technology "sweet spot" the point where cost, performance, compatibility, and useful life are in balance.

A key decision is whether to buy a brand-name system or an unknown-brand machine, have a PC built to order, or build it yourself. Choices for laptop computers are much more limited: brand-name systems dominate, trailed by a few off-brand manufacturers. There are no build-it-yourself options, though manufactured systems can be customised extensively.

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Each purchasing choice has advantages and advocates. Brand-name systems can be evaluated and compared by consulting references such as Consumer Reports magazine, are available everywhere via catalogue or on-line shopping, and may have better standard or optional warranties (often worthwhile for quick service and peace of mind). But brand-name systems sometimes suffer from using commodity parts vs best-quality components.

Unknown-brand machines can be reliable money savers or risky acquisitions. I'd only buy such a system from a trusted store with a flexible return policy. I favour having PCs built to order by small local shops with established reputations, offering maximum flexibility and consultation during design. And I've enjoyed watching my PCs take shape as they're assembled from a tableful of parts!

Some people build their own PCs, often with training and mentoring from computer user group volunteers. This demystifies system innards, greatly facilitating diagnosing and repairing problems and upgrading components. Build-to-order and build-yourself allow specifying brand-name parts for improved performance and reliability.

No matter where you purchase, look carefully at monitor choices. Traditional CRT monitors prices have declined, allowing buying larger devices with better resolution. And newer/thinner/lighter LCD panels offer a powerful -- though sometimes less flexible -- alternative. Visit stores to compare

brands and models and explore settings to match your preferences.

Decide how you'll back up your software and data. Choices include a second -- perhaps external or removable -- hard drive, writable optical media such as DVD, and tape. The first two are most often used, with each having unique advantages. Follow your backup plan regularly; nothing ruins a day like losing months or years of can't-be-replaced data, not to mention having to reconstruct all your software.

Small choices can make large differences in productivity and comfort. For example, mouse technology has advanced far beyond the traditional two-button wired device. Mouse alternatives include trackball and wireless devices, gadgets with many extra programmable buttons, wheel mice allowing horizontal/vertical scrolling, etc. Considering how much time you'll use your pointing device, it's worth spending a little extra money to have the device that suits you best!

Windows offers many choices for easing use -- enlarging type, making keyboarding easier, providing special audible and visual cues, etc. Accessibility options are found in different places -- usually via Control Panel or the Start menu. It's worth exploring these to tailor your PC to your individual preferences. Similarly, small add-on programs can greatly improve a PC's comfort factor. Remember that Windows is highly configurable: you can change how it looks and operates. As you become familiar with your new PC, explore

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options/settings/preferences. Just as you wouldn't insist on driving a car with seats and mirrors exactly as they came from the dealer, don't be captive of Microsoft's initial settings!

Name-brand computers usually include software bundles. Vendors shout about how valuable they are and how much money you're saving on them -- but that's only true if you'll use the software provided. As soon as you have your machine, examine pre-installed software and remove anything you know you won't use. Then defrag your disk and then install the programs you'll use. These simple steps will make your machine run better by decluttering it.

Finally, If you understand how to do this, use built-in tools such as MSCONFIG to chop out unneeded services started by default when your system boots.

Software bundles often include junior-grade versions or limited-time trial copies of critical tools such as anti-virus and anti-spyware software. For system reliability and security, upgrade these to full versions and subscribe to update services.

Not much else in modern life besides computers keeps getting faster/better/cheaper. And it's not hard to find or build a computer that meets needs for several years, runs reliably, and doesn't break the bank.

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## Tech News

by Sue Crane  
Big Bear Computer Club  
[www.bigbearcc.org](http://www.bigbearcc.org)

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IRS partners Intuit, TaxAct and eSmartTax are offering no-cost services to everyone this year. Two additional companies, FreeTaxUSA.com and FileYourTaxes.com, are extending free services to residents of certain U.S. states. The 10 remaining participating companies, including tax giant H&R Block, have no-cost programs for specific demographics, such as people over the age of 60 or members of the military.

40 states and the District of Columbia are working on a national Internet sales tax system. SSTP (Streamlined Sales Tax Project) has issued two requests for bids for software and Web-based networks to track on-line purchases sales tax payments. As currently envisioned by the states, Web merchants would pay nothing for the services;

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instead, the vendors would take a cut from tax revenues

EBay and Intel have developed a "Rethink Initiative" which seeks to bring together public and private organisations to promote recycling and reuse of old PCs and consumer electronics products. The announcement comes days after the Electronic Waste Recycling Act of 2003 became active in California, requiring consumers to pay an Electronic Waste Recycling Fee for certain devices, including monitors and laptop computers. EBay president and chief executive officer Meg Whitman said. "I would love to try as an industry to come together with market-based solutions so we won't have to face federal and state regulation."

Vonage, the No. 1 Internet phone company, is offering its subscribers a wireless Wi-Fi phone that can make calls over the Internet at homes or at public Wi-Fi hot spots. New phone will let consumers make VoIP calls from any Wi-Fi hot spot. Wi-Fi calls are essentially free, in contrast to cell phone calls, and customers will plug a regular phone into an adapter linked to a broadband Internet line. Vonage will then turn the calls into data that travel by Internet before being converted back to voice at the other end. Meanwhile, Comcast Corp., the nation's biggest cable company, said Monday it plans to roll out phone service over the Internet to all 21.5 million of its customers within the next year and a half, bringing the on-line technology into the mainstream.

New technology known as eICU ("Enhanced Intensive Care") lets

physicians miles away from their patents manage health care via cameras and banks of computer screens. The technology is already in use at least 18 hospital systems nationwide. Whereas traditional health care systems rely on nurses to notice a problem with a patient and relay the information to a doctor, eICU informs the doctor directly. The doctor can check the patient's ventilator, intravenous medication and anything else in the patient's room, and one physician notes: "The camera is such that I can count eyelashes."

If you've bought a plasma TV, you might get one-upped in two years, when TVs using new carbon technology arrive. A new type of flat-panel display that will rely on diamonds or carbon nanotubes--two forms of pure carbon--to produce images. Theoretically, these "field effect displays," or FEDs, will consume less energy than plasma or liquid crystal display (LCD) TVs, deliver a better picture and even cost less.

RaySat has developed a satellite antenna that turns a moving vehicle into a mobile Wi-Fi hotspot. In addition to the Internet access service, RaySat has developed an antenna that enables cars to receive satellite TV broadcasts -- an application that may have broader appeal among consumers. RaySat expects to launch its new product in the third quarter of this year.

For people fed up with pecking out text messages on their mobile phone, Samsung Electronics may have an answer. The South Korean electronics maker has developed what it is calling the

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world's first mobile phones that can convert spoken words into text messages. All three handsets will be released in the U.S. sometime during the first quarter.

In Asia, cell phone handset makers are already marketing phones with embedded memory devices (a chip or magnetic strip) that can be swiped against credit or debit card readers in much the same way consumers now use plastic, and trials are underway to bring the technology to the U.S. Details are still being worked on important issues such as security. "The phones are exciting, but it's going to be a long time" before a widespread base of U.S. merchants and consumers are equipped to use them, says Visa International VP Sue Gordon-Lathrop.

The U.S. Army is sending 18 remote controlled robotic soldiers called SWORDS (Special Weapons Observation Reconnaissance Detection Systems) to Iraq, but they are not the autonomous killer robots of science fiction: a SWORDS robot shoots only when its human operator presses a button (after identifying a target on video shot by the robot's cameras).

**MOST IDENTITY THEFT OCCURS OFF-LINE.** Despite growing concerns over on-line fraud, a new study conducted by the Better Business Bureau and Javelin Research finds that most cases of identity theft can be traced to a lost or stolen wallet or checkbook, rather than vulnerable on-line financial data. Computer crimes make up just 12% of all ID fraud cases in which the origin is known, and half of those are

attributed to spyware that sneaks onto computers and steals private information.

## VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol)

by Brian K. Lewis  
Sarasota Personal Computer Users Group, Inc.  
[www.spcug.org](http://www.spcug.org)

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Are you using the Internet for your local and/or long distance service ? If not, then maybe you need to read this article to find out how some computer users are saving "mucho dinero" on their telephone calls.

VOIP stands for Voice over Internet Protocol. There are ways to use the Internet for free phone calls, low cost phone calls (2 cents per minute) or a monthly fixed rate for both local and long-distance calls. So how is it possible to transmit your voice over your Internet connection ? We'll look at some of the technical aspects first. Then I can discuss some of the services that are available for you to check out further.

When you use your telephone your voice is converted into electrical impulses and transmitted over copper wires to another phone.

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There it is converted back to sound waves. These impulses are transmitted via several switches in the telephone network. This system is referred to as the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN). As long as you are talking on the phone you have a constant circuit connection between the two phones. In the original PSTN system, all calls required a dedicated wire for each call. For the period of time you were on the phone you "owned" a copper wire connection between your phone and the other party. In today's PSTN, all calls are digitised and can be combined with thousands of others running over fiber optic cable between central stations. However, the connection between the two phones must remain open for the length of the call.

When computer data is transmitted over phone lines or cable, it is also in digital form. However, the data is sent in packets and does not require a dedicated pathway to reach its destination. In fact, when a computer sends a stream of data packets, they may all arrive at their destination after travelling different routes. There are thousands of possible paths between any origin and any destination. In addition, packets from other origins can use any time spaces between your packets. This is a more efficient system, as a circuit does not need to be kept open. This system is referred to as packet switching.

So if your e-mail is being chopped up into small packets, how does the system know what to do with them? Each packet contains an address that tells the router what its final destination is. The sending computer sends the packet off to a

router and then goes on to its next operation. The router selects a path to another router and sends the packet off. This process continues to the destination computer. At the destination, the receiving computer assembles the packets based on the information contained in each packet.

So what does this have to do with Internet phones? Very simple. VOIP uses the packet switching technology to transmit your call. The digitisation of your voice occurs either through your sound card or a device known as an analog telephone adapter (ATA). There are also Internet phones which connect directly to a network router and handle the conversion process. The voice packets that result from these various adapters are routed over the Internet in the same way as data packets. When you make a phone call, there is always dead space when no one is talking. With the packet system, other data packets from other sources are being transmitted over the Internet making maximum use of its capacity.

In the early days of VOIP sound quality was poor and the method of operation more like using a walkie-talkie. Today's equipment is vastly improved. Sound quality on many VOIP systems is the equivalent of that found in the PSTN. Depending on the system you are using, you can dial any number and your call will be routed over the Internet. In such a system, you and the party you called won't see any difference in operation or sound from that of the PSTN.

So why would you be interested in using an Internet phone instead of

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your current local/long distance PSTN service ? One big factor for many people is cost. The cost of Internet service ranges from free to \$25/month (more in some cases) for unlimited calls. In addition, many of the VOIP services offer features that cost you extra through your local phone company. It is not unusual for a VOIP provider to include Caller ID, Call waiting, Call transfer, call forwarding, voicemail and three way calling as part of the basic price.

Now let's look at some of the providers and their services. Skype ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)) offers a free service that allows you to connect to other Skype users. The software for this can be downloaded from their website. It took just a few minutes to install it on my computer. Once you have installed it, you need to set up a call list of other users. So you have to contact people that you call frequently and have them install the Skype software. From that point on, it becomes much like instant messaging. If the person you are calling is on-line, you can connect and talk to them. Otherwise, they have no way to know that you are calling. The reverse is also true if they want to call you. The minimum hardware you need for this are speakers connected to your sound card and a microphone. You can also use a headset with a built-in microphone. It is also advisable that you have a broadband connection, either cable or DSL. In my testing of it, once I had a connection, the call was quite clear with no background static or other problems.

So what do you do if you have Skype and want to call someone

who doesn't have Skype ? You can get SkypeOut that allows you to call any phone number anywhere in the world for about 2 cents/minute. After you install the SkypeOut software you buy credit on their Internet site which you can then use for your calls. Some reviewers have had sound problems with SkypeOut. I have not tested it.

There are other free services available as well. One is Free World Dialup. (This is a quote from their website: "FWD allows you to make free phone calls using any broadband connection using devices that follow Internet standards. This can be a 'regular' telephone connected to a packetiser, an IP Phone or any number of free soft-phones (software for your PC or PDA).") In order to use the system you need to download and install the software. Then you obtain a phone number from FWD. The hardware you need is a SIP compatible ATA adapter that you connect to a network router that connects to your modem. You can then connect any telephone to the jack in the ATA adapter. Now you're ready to dial any FWD user anywhere in the world. However, you cannot dial a regular PSTN phone from this system without purchasing time from another VOIP provider. The advantage of FWD over Skype is that your computer doesn't have to be on to receive calls. Your phone will ring just as it did when connected to the PSTN phone system.

There is another advantage to FWD. This system uses the Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) standard. This allows FWD users

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to call others who are not member of FWD but are connected by a different SIP compatible service. Other free services currently using the SIP standard are IPTEL.org and SIPPhone.com. Skype does not adhere to the SIP standard.

Now we get to the services that charge a monthly fee. These providers furnish a SIP compatible ATA adapter and in some instances the router for your telephone connection. This list includes companies like AT&T (CallVantage), Verizon (VoiceWing), Packet8, VoicePulse and Vonage. Of these, AT&T and Verizon are the most expensive. Several of these providers are preparing wireless units that will allow you to connect through any WiFi hotspot. Vonage has announced that they expect to have a wireless unit available by mid-summer 2005. That means you could make and receive call while you are on the road. Also, by taking your ATA adapter with you when you travel, connections can be made through broadband data ports in many hotels and motels.

Of these providers, Vonage has been in the game longer than the others and has a strong reputation as to its quality. They have two basic plans: (1) \$24.99 for unlimited calling in the U.S. and Canada, (2) \$14.99 for 500 long-distance minutes. They also offer virtual phone numbers with any area code you prefer. Dialing other numbers in your area code requires just seven digits. You can add a fax line for \$10 per month or toll-free numbers for \$5 per month. With Vonage and these other providers, you can call any PSTN number or numbers on the FWD

network. For more details on the specific services provided by these companies I would suggest you check their web sites.

So what are the drawbacks to VOIP services ? First, if your Internet provider has a service outage, then your phone service is also down. Second, if there is a power outage you lose your phone service unless your system has a battery backup to keep it running. Another disadvantage is that most of these services can't connect to 911. In some cases, you can call 911 after you have provided the service with location information for their files. They need this information so the system will know where to direct the call. However, the 911 operator can't see your name or address and you have to provide that information when you make the call.

In spite of these disadvantages, VOIP usage is rapidly increasing. If you are interested in testing VOIP, I suggest you start with one of the free services. Try it, you may like it.

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