

OT: What do you do with your old computers?

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- *From:* "Pete Dashwood" <dashwood@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
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I'm feeling pretty chirpy because the sun is shining again (dying summer wags its tail) and the recent rain allowed me to stay indoors and work on a project that has been problematic for some time, my Home Wireless LAN network.

This is now complete and just waiting for me to finish writing the IVR software for the service that will answer my phone.

A couple of things came out of this which are apropos some things discussed here recently.

We talked about the lack of low level training in young people and whether they actually need it. I was of the opinion that they don't, but I think I need to modify that a little bit, after a long and fruitless discussion with a Seagate Helpdesk somewhere on the sub-continent yesterday. I'll come to that in a minute...

Some time ago I installed a wireless router and was delighted that I could now use my notebook freely in the house or garden. (This Core 2 Duo machine is called "Bigblack" and runs winXP SP2). Pretty soon, and really just for fun, I took my previous notebook (which did not have a wireless card) and connected that to the WLAN as well, using a small USB wireless link. Now I could work on either machine and share whatever files I liked between them. (This Pentium 4 machine is called petesp4 – it runs WinXP SP2 also). I still needed to physically connect a printer to either machine if I needed printout. Then I got to thinking... It would be pretty cool to be able to print from these machines to a printer on the WLAN. Apart from anything else, it would enable me to move my printer into a back room with the router, rather than have it occupying space in the lounge... Finally, enlightenment dawned and I realised that the WLAN could actually be quite powerful and useful, (rather than just a fun thing that let me use notebooks from anywhere), if I organised it right. The first step was to decide what services I needed from the WLAN. I needed printing. But I also needed to have something answer my landline phone (sure, I could buy the service from my provider, or buy a device to do it, but where's the fun in that? :-). So much better if the WLAN could do it.

And what about backups for petesp4 and Bigblack? I do development (COBOL) on petesp4, and development (Web and C#) on Bigblack. Backups are to DVD and

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only of current development work. If the WLAN had a high capacity storage device that was shared, and could be used for backups in the background, it would be sweet...

So, having decided where I'm going, I need a machine to drive this "node" of the WLAN and provide all this stuff. But I don't want to lash out and buy a new notebook. (Besides, it would come with Vista and I'd have to remove it and install XP, so it would mean money and hassle. Furthermore, I don't buy equipment unless I know it will pay for itself and I'm due for it. I'm not due for a new notebook for a couple of years yet and will await Windows 7 so I can leapfrog Vista.)

But hang on a minute... I have a couple of Notebooks that have been boxed up for years and are no longer used. One (a 386 machine) runs Win 3.2 and DOS, the other (a Pentium 3) runs Win 98 SE. Why not leverage some of this computer power that is sitting dormant and get some use out of it?

So I broke out the Pentium 3 that runs Win 98 SE...(hereinafter referred to as "petesp3")

I lashed out on a new wireless adapter for it (\$NZ65) and a new Seagate FreeAgent 300GB disk (\$NZ250), this was within the budget I was prepared to spend to get the functionality described.

It took some coaxing and several BSODs (I'd forgotten what they look like :-)) but I finally got it to accept the wireless adapter and join the WLAN. If any of you decide to do what I'm describing, and utilise some of your old computers, don't hesitate to contact me if you need help. I know my way round configuring networks for Win 98 pretty well now... :-)

This brings me to the point about low level knowledge. We expect Wizards to do stuff for us and most of the time they do, but there are times when it is necessary to revert to an earlier world, where things were done manually. For example, I found that every time I tried to ping Bigblack or petesp4 from petesp3, it would pop up a Dial up networking box, which had to be cancelled before the ping would run. It took me an hour before I remembered what to do about it...:-)

Once it was talking to the network, I decided to install the printer and the Seagate drive on it, so I could share them. The Seagate drive came with a pamphlet which said: "This won't take long." Just connect the power and plug it in to a USB port... under two minutes.

Yeah, right... :-) Plug n Play on petesp3 recognised the device but required a driver for it. (Seems reasonable to me...). There wasn't one, so I went to their web site and spent a couple of hours going through futile flowcharts that did not represent my situation, and came out no further ahead. I decided to install it on Bigblack and see if it worked. It did exactly the same as it did on Win 98. Was recognised, searched for and failed to find a driver, and was marked as an unknown device.

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I phoned the Seagate help desk and explained that the device was looking for a driver but their web site said it didn't need one and there were no downloads available. It was really tiresome and although the young lady spoke very good English and tried to be helpful, she simply didn't understand what was going on. She put me on hold and consulted her supervisor, who said that the driver was a part of the OS and did not need to be installed. I asked if they could tell me the name of the driver so I could search my system and make sure it was available. No. Nobody knew, neither could they find out.

Then they said: "It won't work with Win 98." OK, but no-one told me when I bought it that that was the case, and nowhere on the box or in the literature does it say that. It works on a USB port, version 1 or 2. Besides, I WANT it to work with Win 98 and I am a computer programmer...:-)

I tried again on Bigblack, and this time I opted to tell it where the driver was. I pointed it manually at the driver install packages and it found what it needed and installed OK. (Obviously, the Plug nPlay search was not complete enough...) This meant I now knew which USB driver was required, so I installed that driver to petesp3, did the same manual process I had done on Bigblack with the USB install, and, of course, it worked perfectly. However, because Win 98 was using FAT 32 and the drive was preformatted for NTFS, I had to reformat it. It is very fast, and I can access it from anywhere.

So I now have an old win98 machine in a second lease of life, driving services on my Wireless LAN. It seems quite happy sitting in a back room with the router and the printer, out of sight. The phone line coming into the router can be split so it is in easy reach for the answerphone function, which I shall write in C# using MicroSoft's TAPI, and which will plug into the internal modem port on the P3 machine. It is really cool and I'm very happy with it.

SUMMARISING:

1. Your "old" equipment can be very useful, as long as you don't buy into the "It only works with the latest and greatest..." philosophy which kids in computer shops are trained to ascribe to.
2. Although Wizards and high level approaches are very good and save time, most of the time, there is still no substitute for knowledge and attitude when it comes to problem solution. I don't think that people in the future will need to have the low level of knowledge that we did, but an aggressive and tenacious attitude to solving problems, I don't think, will ever be out of style. To be fair, if I didn't have the background that I do, I COULD have solved my problem by buying a new machine... and that is what so many people are forced to do. (It's like re-installing the OS instead of locating and fixing the problem; sometimes it is easier to do that, but many times it is done simply because the necessary knowledge isn't there.)

FINALLY:

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As noted above, if you decide to leverage some of your "old" equipment and hit problems, I'm really happy to help. This has been a really fun project... :-)

Pete.

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"I used to write COBOL...now I can do anything."

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