

Use of Email by the Branch

At the last branch AGM it was agreed that email would be the preferred means of distributing branch communications and information about upcoming events. This will be cheaper, quicker and easier¹.

The use of email for branch matters is still very new and we will be continually improving the service as we learn more about what is good or bad use. We ask for your patience whilst we get better at this².

This newsletter aims to outline how the branch officers intend to use email responsibly and to explain our chosen actions. We have alluded to the use of *free software* that can be quite large to download. So we have also prepared a CD-Rom with recent versions of each piece of software mentioned. This will be available to anyone who has given the committee his or her email address³ (so we can chase it up when someone else wants it). Each piece of software comes with its own user instructions. *It is not the intention of the Branch Officers to provide IT support, only to detail what you will need and where to get it.*



Constraints

The branch officers are aware that people have a range of Internet access speed and billing criteria. In addition, individual people have a range of computer knowledge from the frightened to the expert.

Connection Speed

'Pay-as-you-go' is exceedingly cheap to run for simple email communications. Depending on the quantity of emails and sizes of attachments, to collect your emails may only take a minute and will often cost no more than the minimum charge for a single phone call. If your ISP is your BT 'Best Friend' this can reduce the cost by 20%. It can cost you as little as 4p to collect many emails. In contrast to the cost of a single postage stamp, this is cheap. However, this service operates using a 56 kb/s⁴ modem that for technical reasons rarely achieves more than 45 kb/s during operation. Downloading emails with large (> 400 kB⁵) attachments can take a significant time (and therefore cost too), and tie up the phone line preventing voice calls being made. It is also possible to pay for a 'flat-rate' monthly service over 56k modem, where it matters less how long downloads take, but it still ties up the phone line and is as frustratingly slow.



¹ Allowing the branch to reduce costs on printing, copying and postage at the same time reducing secretarial effort and improving the level of service we can offer in terms of more timely information.

² We hope that you will accept both human error and lack of knowledge or training may from time to time cause failed sends, multiple sends or unreadable attachments

³ There will only be one copy of the CD, if it is lost there will not be another one made!

⁴ kb/s = 1024 bits per second, lower case 'b'.

⁵ kB = 1024 Bytes, upper case 'B'. 'B' = 8 'b'.

In the last few years Cable has offered a faster connection speed for their customers and BT have offered a broadband service at 512 kb/s. This service is supposed to be 10 times faster and 'always on' (connected). You no longer have to dial-up to retrieve emails, they are delivered the moment you turn your computer on (or instantly if you never turn it off). *Users of cable and broadband are likely to forget the effects of them sending large Word documents as attachments in emails to pay-as-you-go dial-up recipients who then have to wait 20 minutes to download a message that they might not even want to receive.* It is for this reason that from time to time you may receive a branch email that has a 'zipped' attachment (see below).

Time & Effort

One purpose for the use of email in branch communications is to save time and effort. Presently, one-shot mailings consume enough time without individually customizing separate emails to individuals to meet their exacting requirements. Therefore, we ask that branch members are not fussy about the format of the email they receive, and that they bear in mind the requirements of other branch members too.

Branch Mailings

Privacy

Independently, the Cheltenham Branch Officers have chosen to keep the email list we use private. Presently, the secretary is the only person with a full list of email addresses. To this end, it is our intention that all branch emails are sent using the 'BCC' field. This method shows the other recipients as 'undisclosed' in the received email. Neither the 'To' nor 'CC' fields will be used as they both display the entire list of other recipients, from which people can 'harvest' everyone else's email address for personal use. Subsequently, at the Association wide Branch Officers' meeting (6 March 2004), several knowledgeable officers raised the matter and the use of the BCC field was again highlighted.

If you wish to email another member of the branch, presently you will need to ask the secretary to forward an email on your behalf. Having done so, you have consented for the intended recipient to know your email address, and they can choose to respond, directly to you, indirectly to you via the secretary or not at all. Branch Officers accept no responsibility for this service and provide it on a best endeavours basis only (we wish to be helpful).

We hope to prevent the use of the email list for purposes other than that for which it is intended.

Email size

Attachments can make emails very large. A JPEG picture (which is already in a compressed format) can easily take 300 kB or more. A detailed picture of even greater size can therefore keep a dial-up connection busy for 10 minutes easily, and the recipient may not be best pleased! *Tip:* set your email tool (e.g. Outlook) to not download email of size greater than



400kB, or use 'MailWasher Free' (<http://www.mailwasher.net/>, 1450 kB) to view the subject line of the email and sender's name in order to decide if you want to download it or delete it – useful for slow connections.



An MS Word document can range in size from 30 kB (small) for something simple to 800 kB for something that contains lots of text and a few pictures (and inadvertently lots of 'undo' information) e.g. a branch newsletter. For larger files, dial-up users will not be pleased to have their phone line occupied for 20 minutes whilst the email downloads, so we intend to use file compression software to reduce the effect of this. Such software can make files 50-80% smaller, but it does rely on recipients having the decompression software installed (see below).

Compression Software



'Zipping' or compressing a file prior to sending greatly reduces the size of the file to be sent. A common program for doing this is called WinZip and is freely available from <http://www.winzip.com/>, (1850 kB), however unless you purchase a license, a dialogue box will nag you when using it that you ought to purchase it. If you use it infrequently, this will probably not bother you too much. Windows XP is also able to read zipped files with a standard installation.

An initial mail shot using a 'zipped' attachment found very few people who were unable to handle this format of file, although there were some. One person who initially could not manage to open it successfully located the program on the Internet, downloaded and installed it and is now quite happy with the process. Another recipient uses non-Microsoft software (don't tell Bill) to view email and requested an uncompressed version. From this initial compressed mail shot, we are now able to make some decisions about how best to use compressed attachments and what file size limit to put on uncompressed attachments. *Please note that we are proposing to use WinZip to compress large files in the future, and this article intends to address the consequences of this decision.* Please bear with us during this learning exercise.

Adobe 'Acrobat'



Besides the distribution of MS Word documents, there is another popular format of file exchange called 'Acrobat' (files ending in .PDF). The software is likely to be installed on your home PC already if it is fairly modern. Many commercial software packages already make extensive use of it for documentation, and bundle the PDF reader software with their own installation CDs⁶. Failing that it can be downloaded free from <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html> (8,700 kB for the basic version).

⁶ It is quite a large download, so hunt through any commercial installation CDs to see if you have any old version. Version 4 or later should do.

This format has the advantages of being compact and un-editable, so changes to the distributed file cannot be made by accident (or otherwise), nor does it require others to purchase software to read it (e.g. MS Word). If you browse the web often, you will undoubtedly have already come across the widespread use of this format. Whilst not presently used by the branch, this format is a likely future step.

MS Word Viewer



If you do not have MS Word installed on your computer, you can download a free viewer from <http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/> (3860 kB). Unfortunately it does not display the document quite as accurately as the full editor version of Word.

Email Language



It is very easy with email to forget the recipient is missing vital forms of feedback and communication, such as body language and tone of voice. Was a remark made sarcastically or rudely? This issue is particularly acute in the case of a disagreement conveyed by email, especially with little or no friendly greeting, salutation or courteous close. *Please be careful when wording emails!*

What we will send out



The three uses we have identified for emailing branch members is the distribution of the branch newsletter to tower correspondents, shorter, more general notices and reminders for all branch members and the treasurers' annual tower returns. Many branch members have requested to be included in the email containing the newsletter for their own personal convenience. Therefore, it is our intention to only have one emailing list for newsletters and reminders. The email text will indicate if it is intended that tower correspondents take any action so that members may differentiate between the two types of mailing shot, anything more complicated is considered by us to be unnecessary. If you decide at anytime that you no longer wish to receive any branch emails, please let the secretary know and we promise to remove you from the mailing list immediately.

Summary

What you need for branch emails:

- MS Word editor or viewer
- WinZip
- Adobe Acrobat (likely in the future)

Covered separately, what you really ought to have if you connect to the Internet ever:

- Up to date virus checker
- Firewall

This article has been prepared as an introductory brief for Cheltenham Branch Members by your Branch Officers. All the officers have therefore endorsed the email policy above, April 2004.

Safe Internet Use

Here follows a short introduction to the safe use of the Internet. It contains pointers to free software that everyone should use to help each other stay uninfected from computer viruses, if you have not already set up a better alternative.

Virus Checking and Scanning



Computer viruses are rogue programs that get into your computer and then can spread themselves on to other computers. Their function can range from the irritating to the malicious, e.g. shutting down your computer randomly without notice (usually in the middle of editing an important document). For convenience we like to be connected to the Internet, so there are some measures we should all take to reduce the spread of viruses.

Heavy weight virus checking software available from places like PC World include Symantec Norton Anti-Virus (<http://www.symantec.com/>), Sophos (<http://www.sophos.com/>), and McAfee (<http://us.mcafee.com/>). These are all costly packages that require an annual fee to continue to receive updates that contain detection signatures of the latest viruses. If you would prefer something more lightweight and *FREE*, try AVG from Grisoft (<http://www.grisoft.com/>, 5800 kB). Version 6 is free, and the upgrade to version 7 requires payment.

Update your virus detection signatures very often! New viruses come out every day, and there is inevitably a delay before software companies release the updates to the signatures database. If your signatures database is more than a few days old you are not protected, more than a week old and it is as good as useless. Set your software to update every day if you are a keen user of the Internet, or every three days if not.

Some packages allow you to 'certify' your sent emails have been scanned on sending with a text note at the foot of the email. This can also quote the virus signatures database date. If you notice the date is a week or more before the email was sent (not received!) then the virus scan is of little comfort. Instead treat the email as potentially infected. An example of the certification text at the foot of an email is given below. You should notice this on all branch emails from the secretary.

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Outgoing mail is certified Virus Free.
Checked by AVG anti-virus system
(http://www.grisoft.com/).
Version: 6.0.656 / Virus Database: 421 - Release
Date: 09/04/2004
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Scan your hard disk regularly for viruses. This is easy if you set up a scheduled job to run every day after you retire for the night, or during a period you are likely to have the computer on if you turn it off each night. Also, configure the automatic downloading of updates to the signature database so you are always current, you can always set your computer to confirm this operation before it proceeds, but the reminder is essential!

Firewall



As already mentioned, new viruses are coming out all the time, using new and clever ways to pass on the infection. One protection measure that can be taken to prevent the spread of the currently undetectable viruses is a 'Firewall', although its main function is to prevent hackers from gaining access to your computer, local hard drive and potentially your home network if you have one. A firewall will monitor the types of communication entering (and sometimes also leaving) your computer and decide if they might be rogue often based on a set of rules you control. For potentially rogue communications you may get a prompt asking you what to do.

Windows XP comes with a simple "Internet Connection Firewall" (ICF) as standard. This is certainly better than nothing, but it only monitors incoming data to your computer, not out going. This means that if your computer has already been quietly infected with a 'Trojan Horse' you will be blissfully unaware of the personal information it might be leaking to a hacker. If you have been infected with a virus, it might be spreading itself from your computer to the Internet without your knowledge. The long awaited and promised Windows XP Service Pack 2 will improve on ICF and add monitoring of outgoing messages, but it is unavailable at the time of writing.

A free and therefore popular alternative firewall comes from ZoneLabs called 'ZoneAlarm' (<http://www.zonelabs.com/>, 4900 kB). The non-Pro version is free and the Pro version requires payment. The free version will monitor incoming and outgoing messages and warn you the first time an application, e.g. Word, tries to access the internet so you can decide if this should be allowed always, on a case by case basis, or never. If you use ZoneAlarm on a WinXP machine, you can safely turn off the inferior ICF.

There are as many commercial firewall packages as there are anti-virus packages, ranging in cost and easily available from high street stores. ZoneAlarm is a free and easy introduction and essential with always-on connections like broadband and Cable Internet.

Once set-up, you will rarely find it intrusive, and it could warn you of something going on without your previous knowledge.

Keep Windows Patched



MS Windows provides convenience often at the expense of security. Hackers keep finding holes in Microsoft's software to exploit, and Microsoft keep releasing 'patches' to correct the deficiency of their software. Shutting the gate after the proverbial horse has bolted? By keeping your Windows installation up to date, you remove entry points for hackers. It is amazing who wants to hack your home PC! Just take a look at the logs ZoneAlarm makes of Internet messages and probes it has rejected for you.