

It's all Geek to Me!!

What's a Home Network good for?



A network is a group of computers that are interconnected. These computers can share resources between them such as printers and storage space. The biggest network is the Internet itself, which is made up of interconnected computers around the world. Companies have realized the benefits of computer networks for years and the technology has become less expensive so now it can be done in the home for a very reasonable price.

A recent customer had three computers in the house and five phone lines to accommodate their needs to have multiple computers on the Internet. They used AOL for dial-up access, ran a home-based business and had two kids.

While doing some maintenance on their business computer, we discussed the problems they had with multiple phone lines and AOL accounts. Their big question was "Isn't there an easier way?" After getting a better idea of what their needs were, I recommended that they install Broadband Internet Access (Verizon DSL or Comcast Cable) and set up a home network.

What can you do with a home network? Well to start, you can share your access to the Internet. Multiple computers utilizing a single Broadband is a great solution. You don't need additional phone lines and even with multiple computers, there is typically no visible difference in performance. Many people have additional phone lines for Internet access but don't add that to the cost of accessing the Internet.

What else can you share? Printers are another great thing to share. You don't need a printer for every computer; you can share a single printer between PCs. This can help keep your costs down as you only have to maintain one printer (instead of buying different toner cartridges and supplies).

If you share a printer from a computer, that computer needs to be on for you to print. If that becomes a problem, you can buy network ready printers that plug directly into your network and don't need a computer to be shared. There are even Wireless Print Servers so you can share a printer by using your Wireless network.

Sharing storage space between computers is another great benefit. You can transfer files between computers at any time. I often backup data from one computer to another in case of equipment failure. Have music recorded on your PC but the burner is on another? No problem, share your files with the other PC and use the burner to make your music CD.

Have a Playstation 2 or Xbox? These can be added to a home network and several games can be played over the internet. There are also many PC games that allow for multiple players. These players can be computers in your house or over the Internet. Some of the big multiplayer games are Battlefield 1942 and Unreal Tournament. I have a brother in North Carolina and the two of us play Unreal Tournament over the Internet and sometimes my teenage son jumps in too. It's a great way to have fun with a group of people.

For a company holiday party I was once asked to set up a gaming network using 5 extra computers. It took us a couple of days to set up the equipment and load multiplayer games on the systems but the employees had a lot of fun. They talked about the unique party all year. The following year they did it again but doubled the capacity because of the number of people that wanted to be involved. We even hooked up a projector to make it easier for people to watch.

There are several solutions to setting up a home network. Many can be setup by the homeowners without a great deal of difficulty. Be careful though, with an always on connection it's possible for people to get to your data. You want to be sure to purchase equipment with a built-in SPI firewall or purchase a firewall for your PC like Norton Personal Firewall or Zone Alarm Pro.

Steve Cote is the owner of Copper Beech Technology Services, located in Salem, NH. He has been involved in the computer industry since 1982. Started in 2003, Copper Beech Technology provides onsite computer support services to residential and business customers in the Merrimack Valley and surrounding communities. These services include PC installation, repairs, upgrades, network installations, virus detection/removal as well as web and e-mail hosting services. You can contact Copper Beech Technology by e-mail at contact@cbtechserv.com. Appointments can also be scheduled by calling 603-490-0691.