

ComputerEdge™ Online — 04/16/10



This issue: Setting Up and Using Home Networks

Getting connected has never been easier! Here's a look at how to set up a wireless home network, and information on sharing music between your computers.

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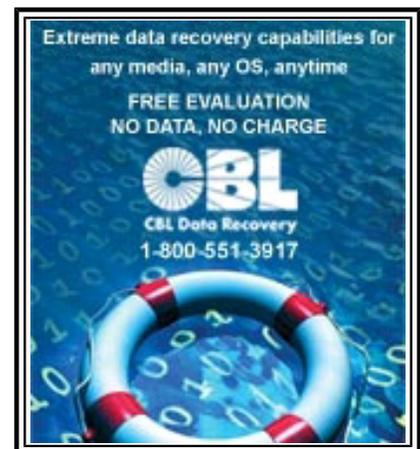
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Digital Dave

“Digital Dave answers your tech questions.” by *Digital Dave*

A reader is getting a message asking to reload Microsoft Works on his computer; a reader's mouse is needing extra clicks to position the cursor; a reader wants to record music from Internet radio.

Dear Digital Dave,

I am not skilled on loading software. My XP computer says I need to reload my Microsoft Works. I have the disc, but do not know what to do. Can you walk me through it?

Do I have to delete the old Works version on the computer or does it write over it?

Big question for me—will I lose my saved spreadsheets?

*George Caruso
Surprise, AZ*

Dear George,

My first question is whether the message you are getting is actually saying "reload" or "reinstall" the software? If it is saying "reload," then you probably do not need your original copies of the software. You're only being asked to close the running program and launch it again. You may be asked to do this after a program update.

If you are being asked to reinstall, then it is a more extensive process and probably does require the original discs—if you're not installing from the Internet. A reinstallation should not wipe out any of your data files (spreadsheets, word processing, etc.), although I can't vouch for every software program out there. To be safe, you should make backup copies of your files before reinstalling.

Sometimes during the installation process you may be told to uninstall the original program first (or the program may not complete installation). In that case, you may need to uninstall before doing the new installation. Often you will find an uninstall program in the same folder as the program itself. Control Panel/Add/Remove Programs should be the place to go to uninstall software in XP if there is no uninstall program. In Windows 7 and Vista, go to Programs and Features in the Control Panel to uninstall.

If you back up your files and proceed carefully, you should be OK, but with computers anything can happen.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

I am using Windows 7 Professional, and up until last week when I would position my mouse over a button all I had to do was click to get it to activate the button. For some reason now I have to click

once like I am trying to get the attention focused, and then a second click to actually activate the button.

I have tried going back to the mouse default settings and even tried a different mouse, but something I am doing or missing is not getting the desired reaction. Any thoughts or assistance would be greatly appreciated.

As always—a faithful reader of your column. Thanks for all your efforts.

*Joe
Rockville, MD*

Dear Joe,

If this is happening in all of your programs, then it sounds like another program is stealing focus from your active window. That would force you to use the first click to bring the window back into focus (active window), then a second click to activate the button. I would look for another program that could be causing your main window to become inactive. The culprit is making itself the active program. The software would need to be working in the background, otherwise it would pop out on top. If anyone else has experienced this problem and has a solution, please leave a comment.

In the off chance that you are referring to double-clicking links in Windows Explorer as opposed to single-clicking, it is worth looking at another option in Windows.

Most people are accustomed to double-clicking the left mouse button to open files and programs. This has been the default for computers for decades. It sounds like this is what you are now required to do. Many people prefer the double-click setup since it lessens the likelihood that files and programs will accidentally be opened when hovering over a link. However, there is a way to change the folder options so that any file or program will open with a single click when you are hovering over the link.

For Windows 7 and Vista, open Windows Explorer (Microsoft Logo key plus E to open Window Explorer), then select Organize/Folder and Search Options. (In Windows XP, select Tools/Folder Options) The Folder Options window will open as shown in Figure 1. Under the General tab, note the "Click items as follows" option. If you set this to single-click, then when you hover over a link and click, the file or program will open.

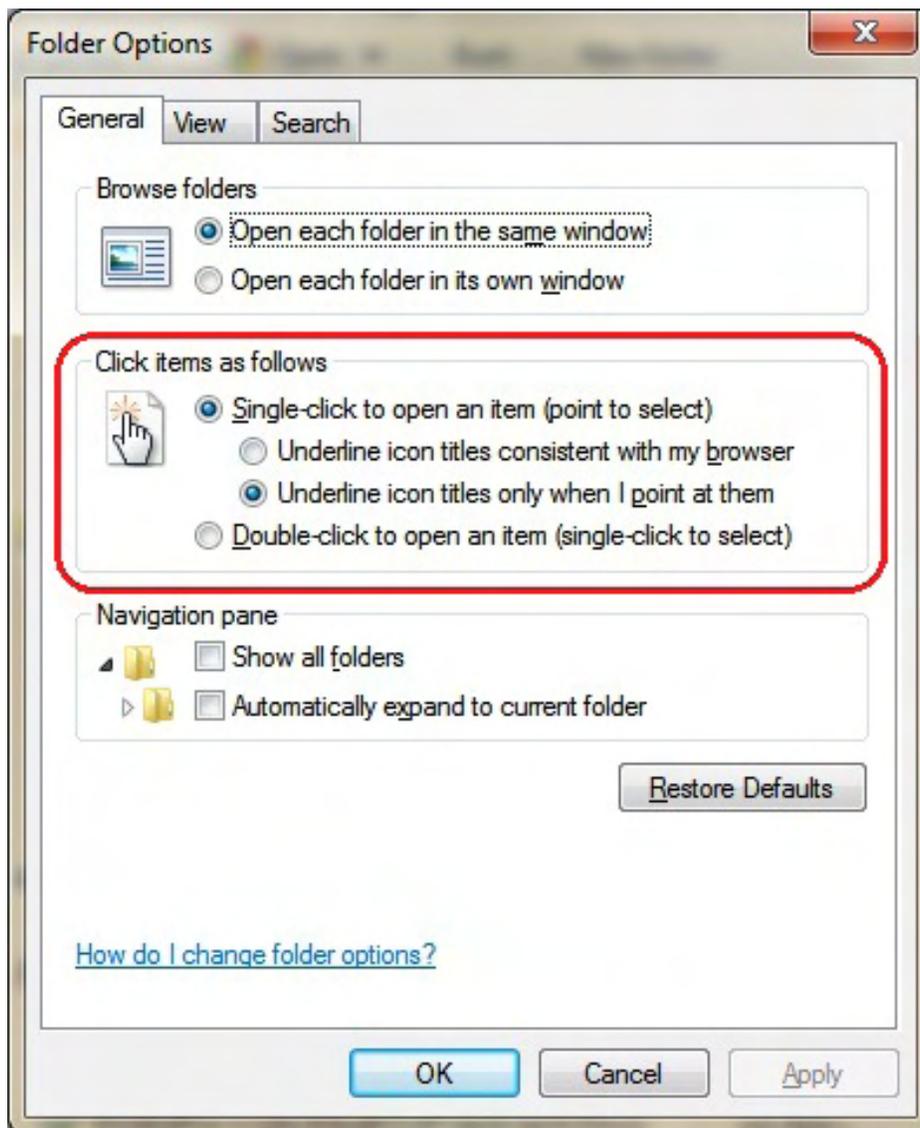


Figure 1. Folder Options window in Windows 7 and Vista.

While the one-click activate may save wear and tear on your left-mouse button and the associated finger, I personally don't like it. It can cause some unusual behavior in programs. For example, when saving files, I often like to select an old file name and modify it before I save. With single-click set, I can't do that because the program will immediately try to save with the first selected file name. Very annoying and probably dangerous.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

I own a Dell Inspiron 1710 PC with a CD/DVD burner built in. I listen to jazz radio stations on my PC. How may I go about recording music from these stations to my PC?

Thanks

*Alvin Joseph Sr.
El Cajon, CA*

Dear Alvin,

If you want to record whatever is playing on your PC, there is a program in Windows called Sound Recorder (All Programs/Accessories—for XP look in the Entertainment folder) which should do the trick. However, while Sound Recorder is pretty straightforward in Windows XP, there are steps that you may need to take in Windows 7 and Vista to record sound playing on your computer.

Microsoft has scaled down Sound Recorder in Windows 7 and Vista to make it more difficult to record music playing on your computer. It is set up to primarily take sound from a microphone. If you want to record the music playing from a Web radio station, then you will need to make sure that your stereo mixer is enabled as well as the default recording device.

To open the Sound window in Windows 7 and Vista, type "sound" into the Search Field of the Start Menu. (You can also open the Sound window via Control Panel/Hardware and Sound/Sound.) Select Sound from the menu and a window similar to Figure 2 should open. Select the Recording tab.



Figure 2. Sound windows in Windows 7 and Vista.

If you do not see Stereo Mix in the list, then you will need to right-click in a blank space in the window and check "Show Disabled Devices."

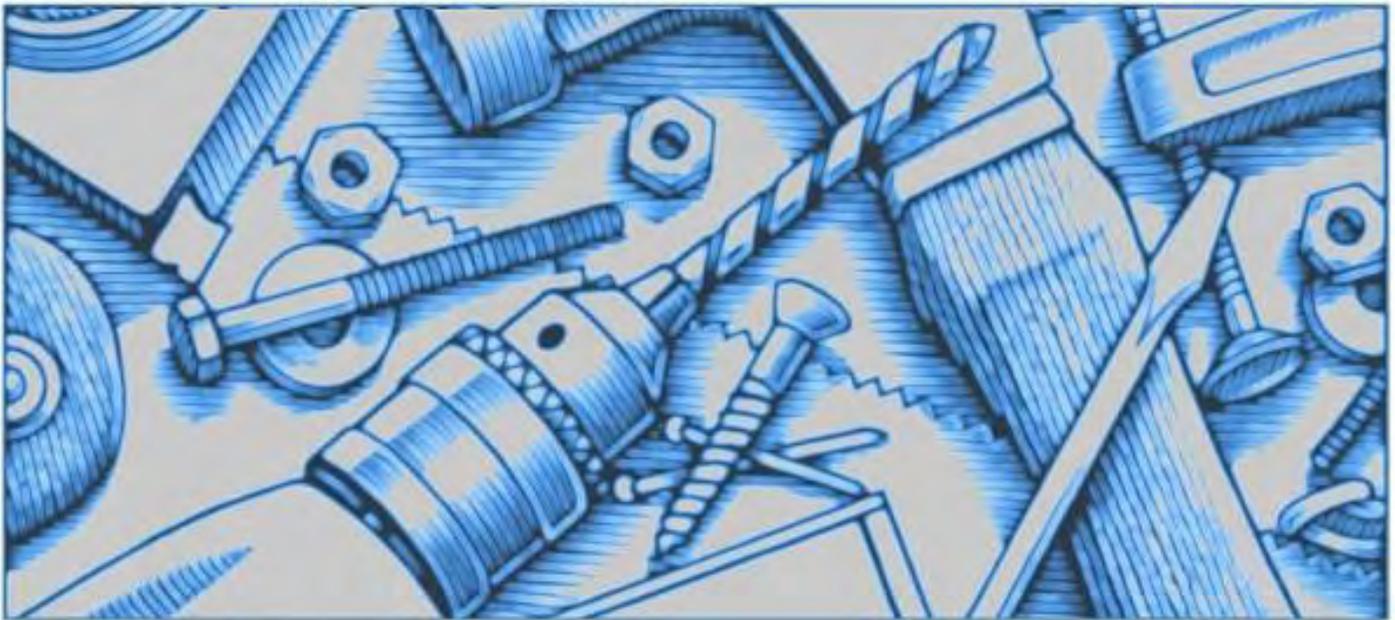
Once Stereo Mix appears, select and right-click on the device to open the menu and enable it. Then you need to set Stereo Mix as the default recording device (right-click menu or button at the bottom of the window). At this point, when

turned on Sound Recorder should record anything coming over the computer. However, you may need to select Properties from the right-click menu; highlight the Levels tab and set the record level higher. Sometimes the record level is set so low that it's impossible to hear what you just recorded.

Of course there are other ways to record from your computer (speaker outputs, third-party software, etc.), but Sound Recorder is what's built into Windows.

Digital Dave

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Setting Up a Wireless Home Network

“Wireless is wonderful for convenience, but security is an issue.” by Pete Choppin

Wireless networks for the home can be an easy way to connect your devices. As long as it is properly secured, a wireless network is a great way to be connected and have the freedom to move anywhere in the house.



In recent years, wireless networking for the home has seen a huge jump. More and more people are opting to install a wireless network. It is replacing wired networks as the standard for home networks.

It's no wonder. Wireless networks have several advantages over wired networks. There are fewer expenses, and printers and scanners are easier to share with other computers. Wireless networks make it easier to connect entertainment centers to your computer. Many other applications and appliances are making their way into the wireless age as well, such as your refrigerator, stereo, watches, key chains, baby video monitors ... the list

goes on.

This article discusses the basics of home wireless networks, required equipment and how to secure your network.

Wireless vs. Wired

Obviously, one of the biggest draws for wireless popularity is that a wireless network eliminates the use of expensive network cables that are difficult to install and limit the types of devices and the number of connections available for your network. This is not to say that a wired network has no advantages. Security is a huge concern for home users. Because wireless technology transfers data over the air, the data you transfer is especially vulnerable to security hacks. It is much more difficult to infiltrate a wired network. This would require a physical connection to the wire. All that someone needs to do to hack a wireless network is capture the data with a receiver.

Another advantage of a wired network over wireless is speed. Wired networks can reach speeds of up to 1,000 megabits per second, whereas wireless speeds are in the range of 20 to 200Mbps. Both wired and wireless technologies are

getting faster, but it doesn't look like wireless is likely to pass up or even catch wired network speeds.

Yet the popularity of wireless networking is rising, and rising quickly. Even with higher security risks and slower speeds, wireless networks are almost the preferred technology. It isn't that people don't want speed and security, but it seems that the convenience of not having to be tethered to a wire is so appealing that users are willing to compromise on speed and risk a certain level of security in order to have the ability to use any network-capable device anywhere in a house.

Still, speed and security are critical points that need to be addressed, and we will go over these soon.

Choosing a Wireless Standard

You may have seen certain standards out there that are referred to as "802.11" and a letter with it such as 802.11a, 802.11b, 802.11g and 802.11n. I won't bore you with how this all came about. The important thing to know about these standards is that the ones to look for are 802.11g and 802.11n. The advantage of these newer standards is mainly speed. You will likely see equipment that is using 802.11 g/n standards.

Dual-Band N Routers

Dual-band a/b/g/n routers support both bands for 11n. They enable 11a and 11n users to transmit at 5GHz and 11b/g and 11n users to transmit at 2.4GHz; however, both bands may run simultaneously or only one band at a time. Simultaneous support provides load balancing and offers the most compatibility with all four standards (a, b, g and n).

Planning Your Wireless Network

Setting up and installing a wireless home network can be quite easy. In most cases, once you unpack the equipment and install it, you can be up and running in a matter of minutes. But there are a few things you should know when planning your network. Here are a few things to consider.

- Do you still plan to have any computers on a wired connection?
- Will you connect any printers to the wireless network?
- Will the wireless router be directly connected to the Internet, or will you have other routers, switches or modems in use?
- Do you plan to have VoIP for phone connections?
- What kind of data do you need to secure, and how will you configure the security?

Hardware and Software

Your network infrastructure, or the hardware pieces that connect everything, for a wireless network are fairly simple. You will need an access point, which, for a home, is typically a wireless router and wireless receivers. Each computer, laptop or other device that needs to connect to the network will need a wireless receiver. This is usually built into the device.

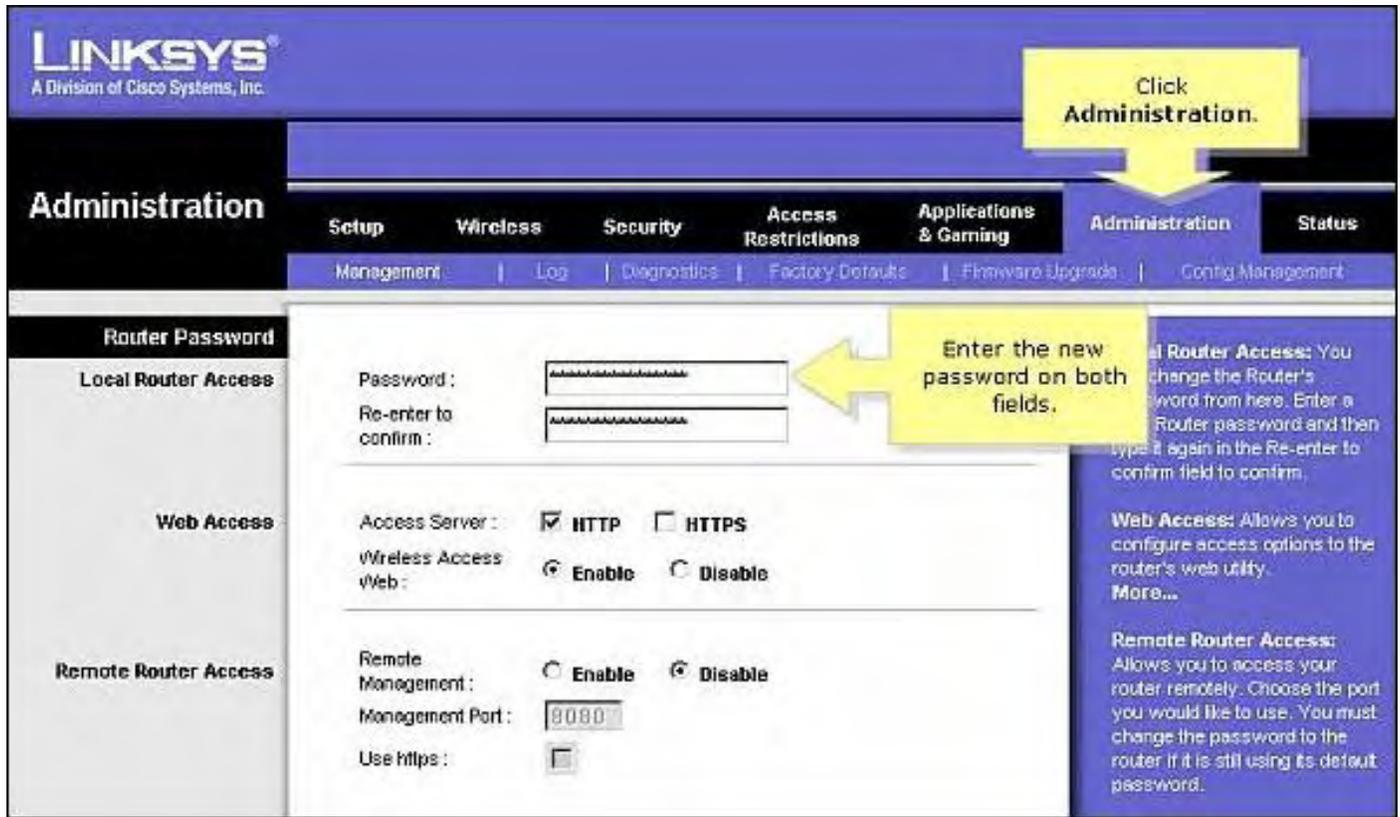
Software to connect wireless devices and configure the network is a little more complicated, although it is fairly easy to configure. Let's start with the router.

Configuring the Router

There are four main areas that need to be configured on your router: the password into the router configuration, Network Name (SSID), the channel on which the router broadcasts, and the security.

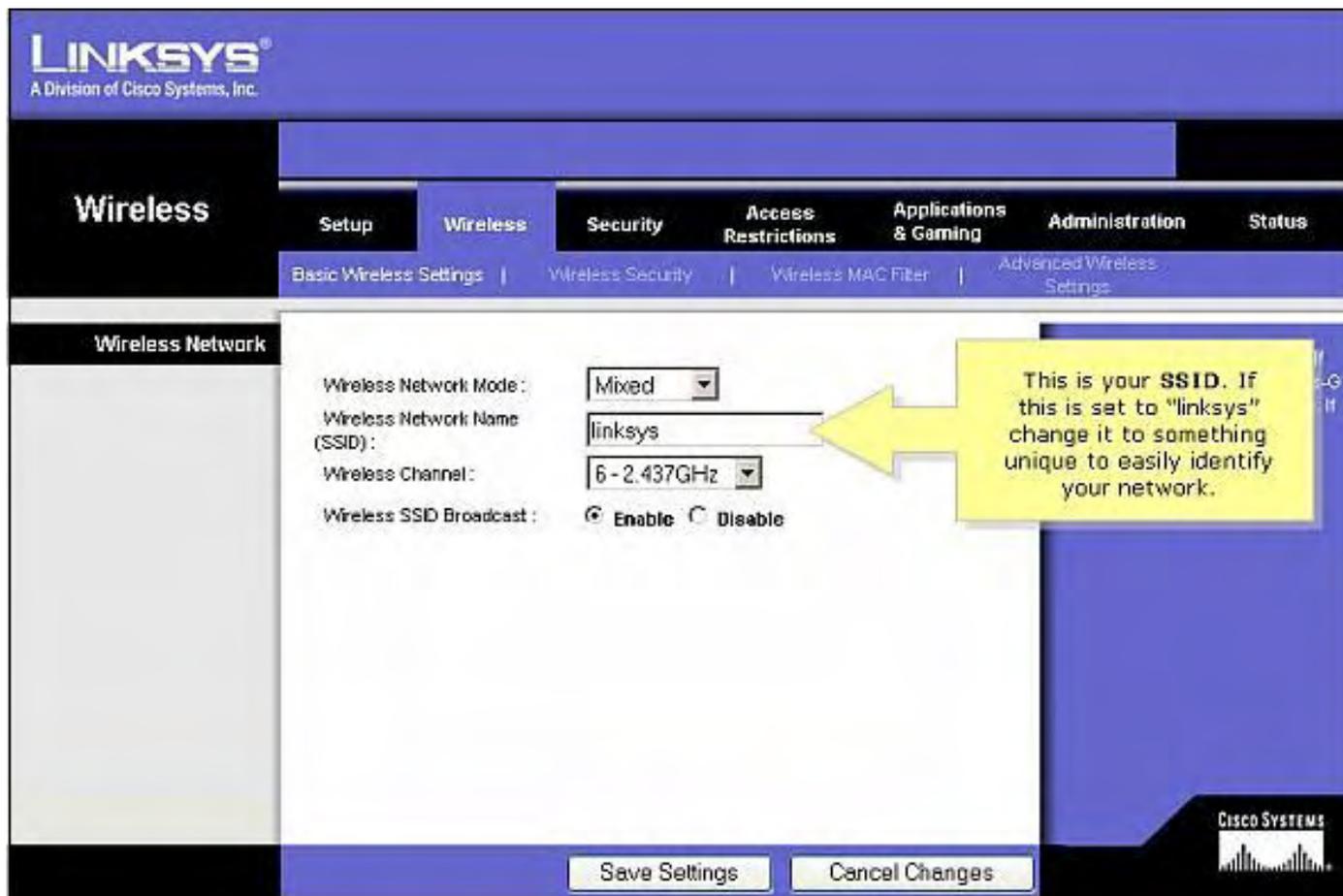
Router Configuration Password—Every router comes from the manufacturer with a user name and password. This would not be a problem, except that each manufacturer sets this exactly the same on their routers. The passwords to each router have now become well known. Most people who are familiar with setting up routers know the passwords to the more common routers, so it is a very good idea to modify this password when you first configure your router.

Most routers have administration settings that allow you to change the router password, similar to this:



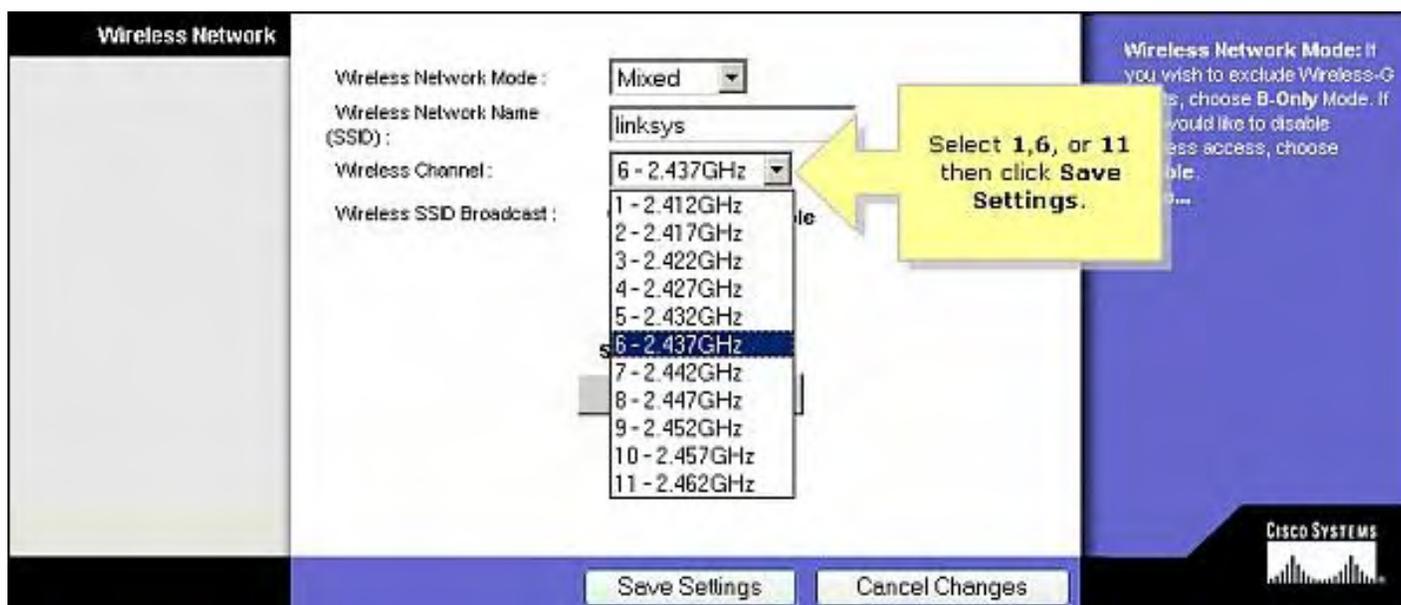
Network Name (SSID)—Wireless networks are identified by a name that is broadcast over the air. This is done so when your device picks up the network from the receiver, you are able to identify which network you are looking at. Remember, it is possible to have several networks available in one area, so identifying specific networks may be helpful. However, this is sometimes exploited by hackers who are looking for an easy network to jump onto. This is especially true when the network name has not been changed from the default name. Additionally, it is possible to disable broadcasting the network name for additional security. This isn't a foolproof method, but it is one more layer of security you may want to add.

The Network Name (often referred to as the SSID) can be changed in the basic wireless settings of most routers:



Network Channel—Wireless networks operate on signal channels. Most wireless routers have 12 channels available. You can set the router to any channel you wish, but the preferred channels are 1, 6 and 11. These are considered non-overlapping, which means they should not interfere with or collide with channels broadcasting similar frequencies. You can also try each and see which one provides the most stable connection for you.

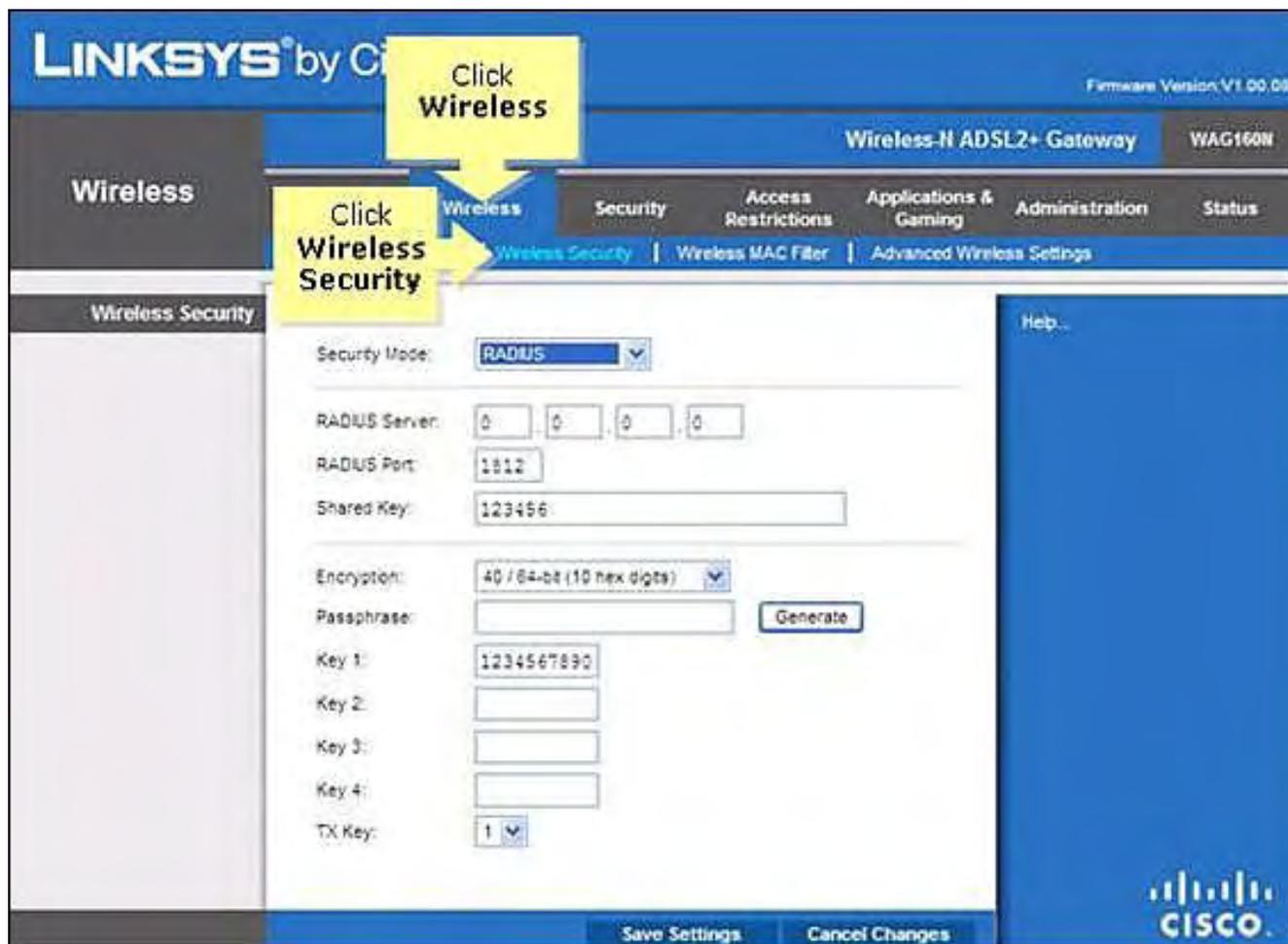
The channel settings should be in the same area as the network name:



Security—Wireless networks, although not as secure as a wired network, have much better security than in the past. The first attempts at securing wireless signals proved to be unsuccessful, but this has changed over the years.

Securing a wireless network requires encrypting the signal. Most every wireless router is equipped with fairly strong 128-bit security using WPA encryption. WPA requires setting a PSK (Pre-Shared Key). To do this, simply set the router security with WPA2 and create a PSK that you will use to connect to the router. The PSK is similar to a password; therefore, anyone who wants to connect to your network will need to have this key.

The settings to enable wireless security are usually in a special security area of the configuration, similar to this:



Step 1—Open the Security Screen



Choose the Security Mode



Choose the Encryption Type



Create Your PSK (Pre-Shared Key)



Remember to Save Settings

That is about everything that you need to do on the wireless router. You could add more advanced security such as MAC filtering. It is a good practice, but the drawback is that for any device you want to have access to the network, you will have to go into the router and add the MAC address for each device. When you consider that this might include all laptops, PDAs, appliances, wireless printers and video equipment, it may become cumbersome. So unless you have a need for really strong security, you will probably be safe just using WPA2 security.

Connecting Devices

Now that your wireless router is configured and secured, you will need to connect your laptops, PDAs and other wireless-capable devices. Since each device has unique settings, it would not be very practical to describe every device in this article. But there are some basic things in common you will need to know. To connect a device, you will need to find the wireless setting on that device. On a laptop, this is usually down in the system tray where a small wireless icon will show. This is down near the clock on the bottom right corner of the screen.



Simply click on the wireless icon and look for your network name. When you connect to that network, you will be prompted for the PSK phrase that you configured on the router.

Other devices such as PDAs have specific settings, but will still need the network name and the PSK. You will have to refer to the manual to find the settings for these devices.

Wireless networks for the home can be an easy way to connect your devices, especially when there is not already a preinstalled wiring system. Rather than trying to feed network wires through walls and ceilings, simply install a wireless router and connect your devices. As long as it is properly secured, a wireless network is a great way to be connected and have the freedom to move anywhere in the house.

Pete Choppin has been an IT Professional for over 15 years. He currently works as a network and systems administrator for a company called Albion based in Clearfield, Utah. He has experience in all types of hardware, software, and networking technologies. He is proficient in many operating systems including Linux, Windows and Macintosh. His interests include cooking, sci-fi, computers and technology, and Web design—a semi-professional endeavor, having designed Web sites in the dental field, e-commerce businesses, and for the Boy Scouts of America.

Pete has been a devout reader of *ComputerEdge* since 1990 and contributes regularly to featured articles as well as the Linux Lessons section of *ComputerEdge*. He can be contacted at pchoppin@comcast.net but prefers to have comments on *ComputerEdge* articles submitted to the editor and posted for the benefit of all readers.

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Streaming Media on a Home Network

“Streaming media is the way of the future.” by Andrea Dunning

Attention, computer users! Your music and video files should not be trapped on your computer, nor should you be storing the same files on multiple computers (except as a backup). Streaming media is the way of the future.

Attention, computer users! Your music and video files should not be trapped on your computer, nor should you be storing the same files on multiple computers (except as a backup). Streaming media is the way of the future.

The most crucial component in steaming music or video from one computer to another is knowing where the files you want are located. You need to know where they are, and the recipient computer needs to know where they are. Often the computer will be able to find the files on its own, but if it can't you will need to point it to the correct folder.

Back when I was using Windows XP, I found it easier to keep all my files in the network folder rather than mess with the permissions for each folder. Now that I have Windows 7, sharing the default folders is very easy, so I leave my files there instead. On a Windows PC, the default location for music files is the folder cleverly named My Music, though the name has been simplified to Music in Windows 7. Video files reside in My Videos or Videos. Users of Mac OS X have Music and Movies as their default folders.

PC users: Windows 7 loves you. Sharing files used to be something of a nuisance, but Microsoft made some big improvements with Windows 7. Now when you set up a network, you create a HomeGroup, which regulates sharing all in one place (as seen in Figure 1 below). You can decide what to share with any other device on the network through the Media Streaming Options menu (Control Panel/Network and Internet/Network and Sharing Center/Media Streaming Options). If you have multiple computers, this is a time when descriptive names help.

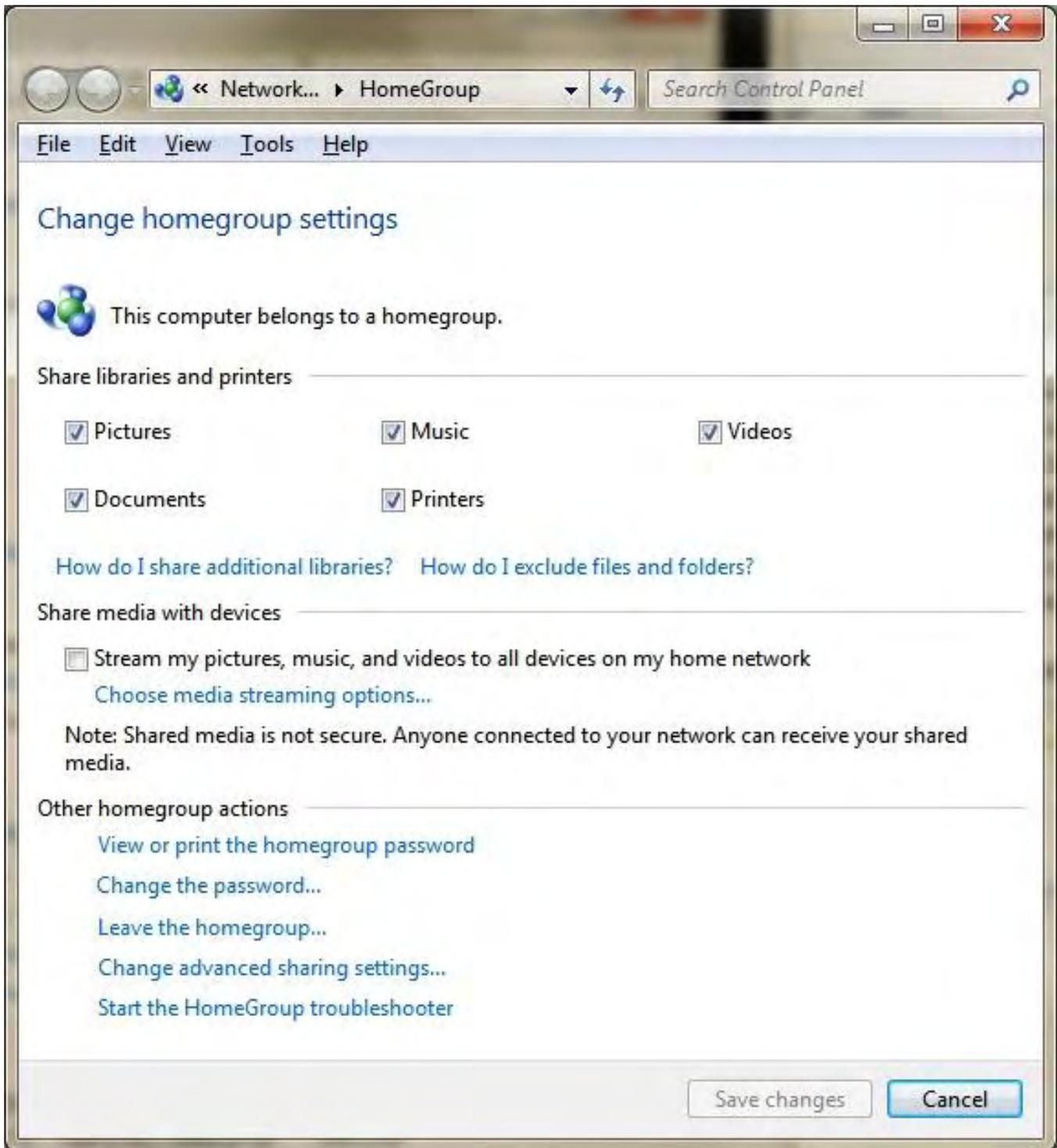


Figure 1. HomeGroup Settings in Windows 7.

Mac users can share files by selecting System Preferences from the Apple menu. That will bring up a menu where Sharing is an option, from which you can select the type of sharing that will be allowed (files, in this case).

When the computer sharing the media is set up, the remainder of the work is done on the computer reading the media. Once it is connected to the network, all that needs to be done is to point programs to the media files to be shared. In iTunes, choose Add Folder to Library from the File menu (as seen in Figure 2 below), and then direct the program to the folder being shared on the network. The process is similar in other programs. Windows Media Player 12 is slightly different in that it will automatically recognize other music libraries on networked computers, as long as they're in the default location for music files.

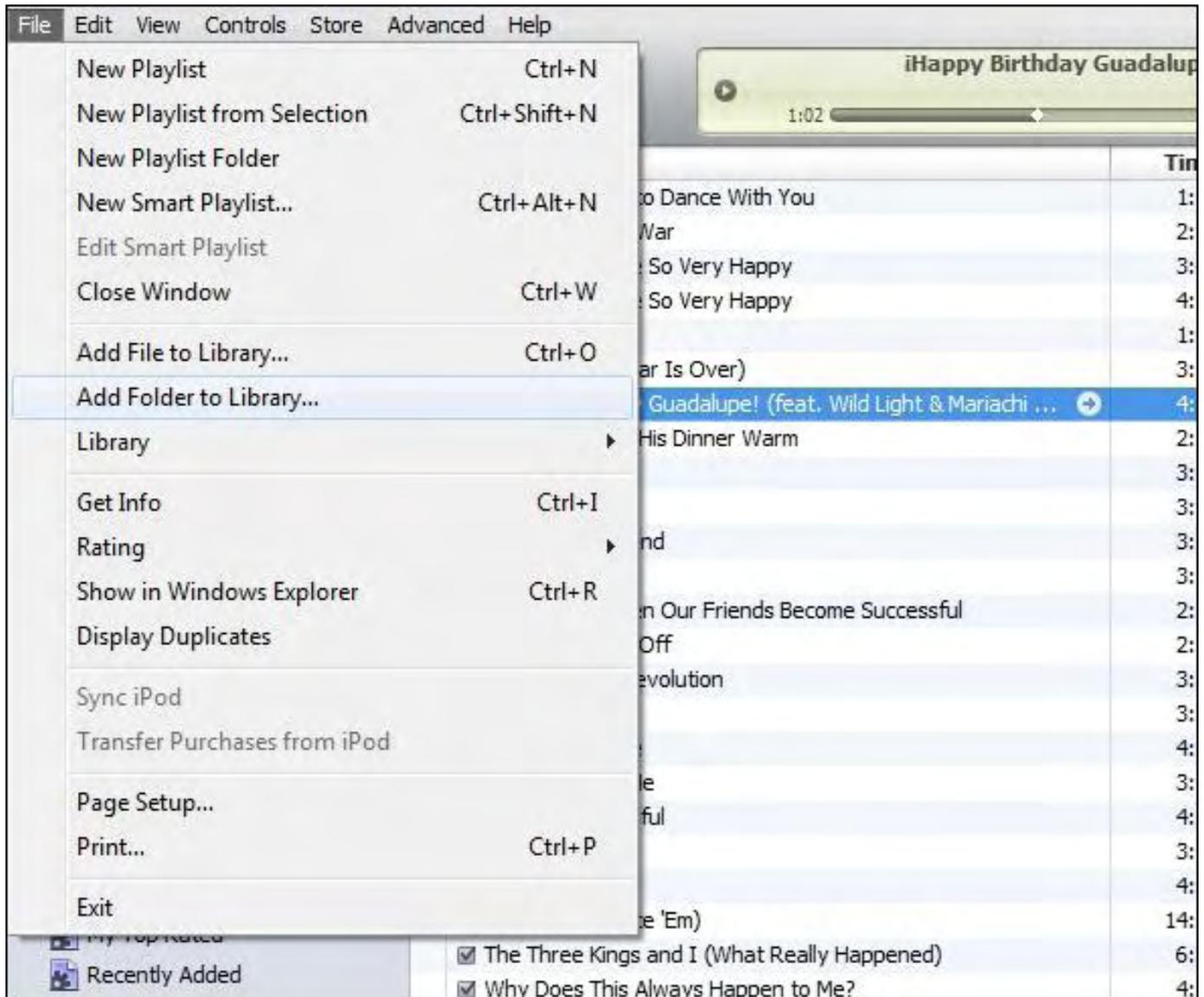


Figure 2. Sharing music in iTunes.

If you or one of your housemates happens to have an Xbox 360, Wii, or PlayStation 3 wired into your home stereo, you're in luck. You can stream music from any computers on your network to your stereo via the game consoles. It used to be that you needed additional programs to stream music onto the Xbox 360 and PS3 (and you might think that is still true if you were to go by the number of Web sites trying to sell you streaming software), but the functionality is now integrated into the console software.

Once your console is connected to your home network, start up Windows Media Player. If you're using Windows Media Player 12, there will be a button on the taskbar called Stream. This will lead you to a menu, where you can configure your network options. If you're feeling secure, you can automatically allow devices to play your media (as seen in Figure 3 below). If you want a little more control, "More streaming options..." allows sharing for each network device to be changed by hand. If you're still using Windows Media Player 11, you have to go to Media Sharing within the Library tab. There will be a list of devices to share with. The PS3 will show up on that list as Unknown Device, while the Xbox (being a Windows devices) will show up as Xbox 360. You then select that device and allow sharing.



Figure 3. Automatically allow devices to play your media in Windows Media Player.

If you're using Windows 7, you don't even have to bother with Windows Media Player. The Media Streaming Options menu, accessible through the Network and Sharing Center or the HomeGroup menu, allows you to control access directly. Oddly enough, the PS3 will still be listed as Unknown Device.

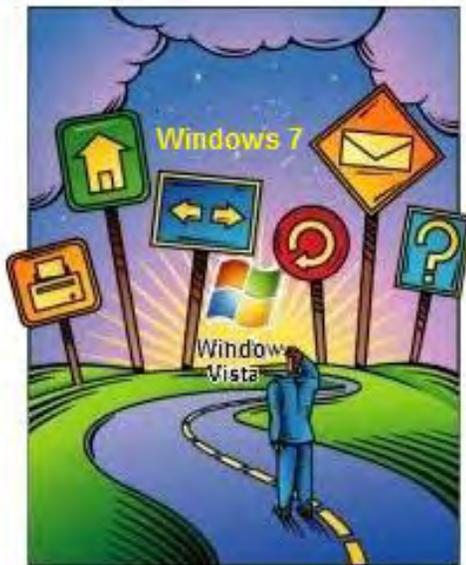
If you have an Xbox 360 and a Mac, third-party software (such as Connect 360) is required for streaming. Streaming from a Mac to a PS3 also requires third-party software, such as NullRiver Medialink. Looking at the sheer number of discussions about the topic on forums, the consoles do not seem very Mac-friendly.

Unfortunately for Wii owners, streaming music to the Wii takes a bit more work. The console is not set up to directly stream from computers. As a workaround, various programs have been developed, for free and for purchase, to stream music from your computer to Wii-compatible Web sites, which you access through the Wii Internet channel.

There are also numerous devices for streaming music directly from your computer to your home stereo, with no second computer required. Media bridges, such as Apple's AirPort Express (which links to iTunes) and or the Linksys Music Bridge, use your home network to allow playlists to be played directly through your stereo. However, like a radio station, you can't change what is playing via your stereo, so if a song you can't stand comes on, you'll have to run back to your computer to jump to the next song on the playlist. If you don't happen to have a home network, Creative's Xmod Wireless sets up its own network to stream music from your PC to your stereo. It even has a remote for controlling playback without having to run over to your computer.

Andrea Dunning is a digital cartographer, AutoCAD drafter, World of Warcraft player extraordinaire and blogger with a Master's in Education. She also serves as tech support for her less computer-savvy family members.

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Windows Tips and Tricks

Windows Tips and Tricks

“Sticky Keys for One-Handed Computing” by Jack Dunning

Five taps of the Shift key activates Sticky Keys, which lets you hit only one key at a time to execute key combinations.

If you have only one hand available (on the phone or eating a burrito), then you may need to do some one-handed computing. I think that we all had that inadequate feeling when we were trying to talk to someone on a cell phone while looking up something on the computer. Using the mouse is easy enough and we can usually get by on the keyboard until we need to do a key combination—which is difficult enough with two hands. To help with these emergency situations, all versions of Windows offer Sticky Keys.

To access Sticky Keys, merely hit the Shift key five times in a row. A window should open similar to Figure 1. As explained, the Sticky Keys feature only affects Shift, Ctrl, Alt and the Windows Logo key.

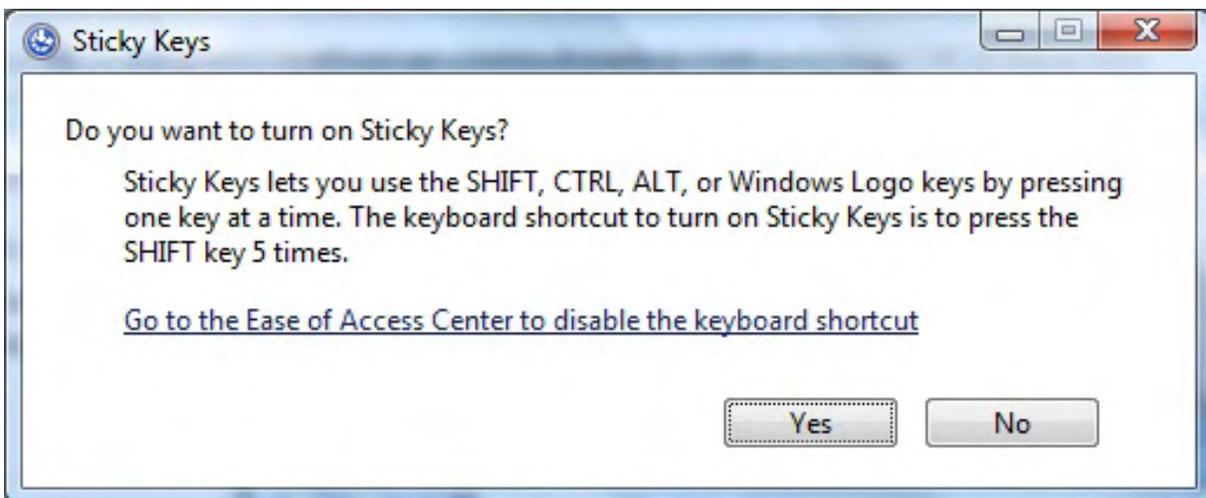


Figure 1. Hit the Shift key five times in a row to open the Sticky Keys window.

If you activate, then you will need to hit only one key at a time to execute combinations. (If two of the keys in the combination are not one of the four listed, then they will still need simultaneous execution after any of the four.) The keys will beep to let you know that they are sticky. They will stay sticky until you hit Shift five times in a row again or you hit two keys simultaneously. You will hear a drooping sound when Sticky Keys deactivates. You can change these features by clicking "Go to the Ease of Access Center to disable the keyboard shortcut" link in the above window. The Setup Sticky Keys window will open (see Figure 2). (If you cancel this window, the Ease of Access Center will start talking to you.)

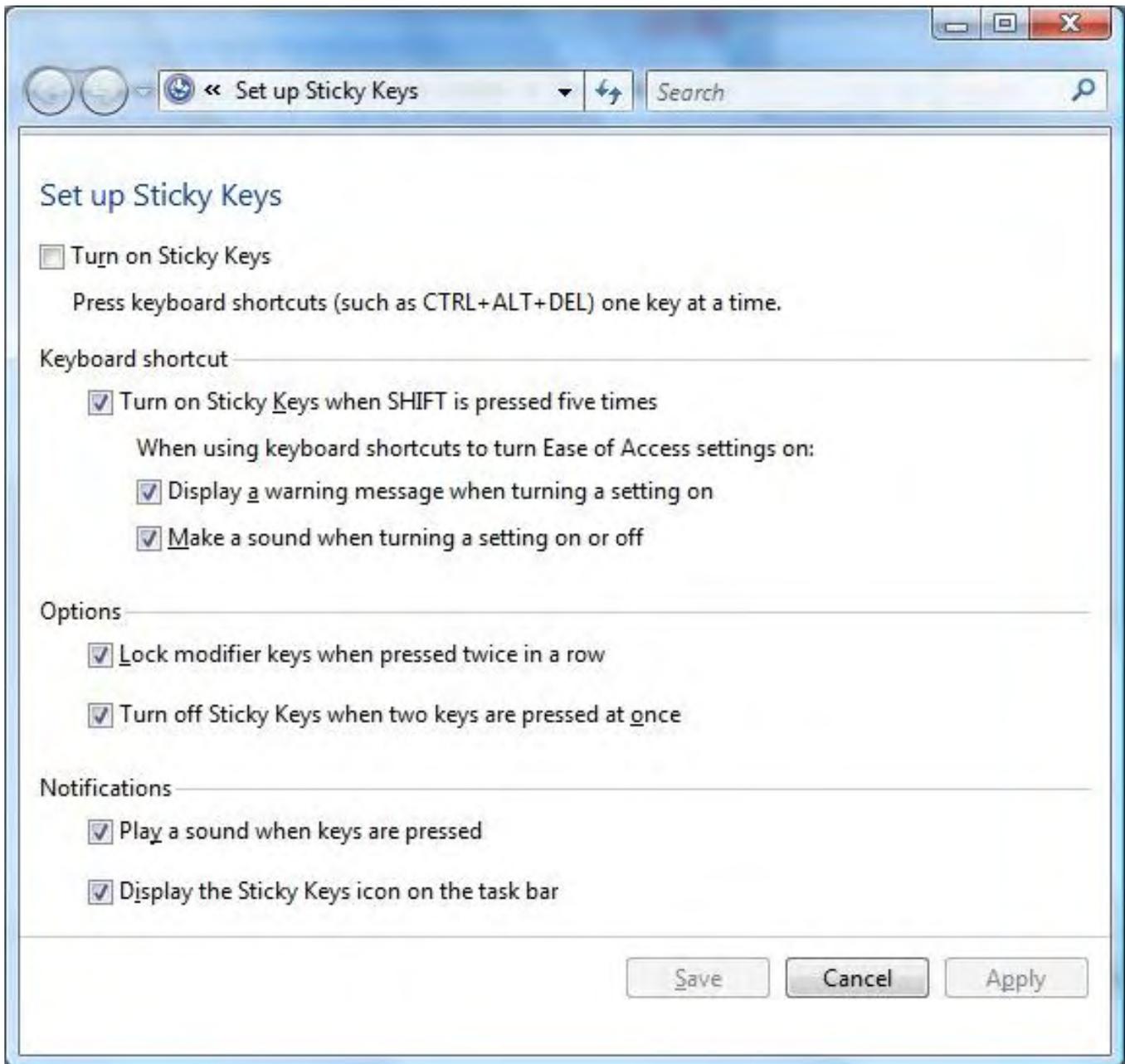


Figure 2. The Setup Sticky Keys window.

You may never have a reason to use Sticky Keys until that one day that you are holding a phone or hot dog that you just can't put down, but you must use the computer. Just remember: five taps of the Shift key.

Jack is the publisher of *ComputerEdge* Magazine. He's been with the magazine since first issue on May 16, 1983. Back then, it was called *The Byte Buyer*. His Web site is www.computoredge.com. He can be reached at ceeditor@computoredge.com

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Wally Wang's Apple Farm

“Easy Mac Home Networking” by Wally Wang

Create a simple home network via Preferences, where you can designate exactly what files to share. For another way to share files, try an online service such as MobileMe. Also, typing on the flat, glass surface of the iPad is surprisingly easy and comfortable; the iPad offers a new app paradigm; and a tip on easily renaming a file on a Mac.

Wally Wang's Apple Farm

If you're technically inclined, it's easy to set up a home network with multiple computers sharing hard disks and printers along with allowing access to each computer's files. For those less technically inclined, creating a home network might sound nice, but it remains too complicated to set up and maintain.

If you have multiple computers sharing a high-speed Internet connection, you can create a simple home network by clicking the Apple menu and choosing Preferences to open a System Preferences window.



Figure 1. The System Preferences window lets you customize your Mac.

Click the Sharing icon under the Internet & Wireless category to open a Sharing window. Now you can check the services you want your Mac to share, such as file sharing, Bluetooth sharing, or printer sharing.

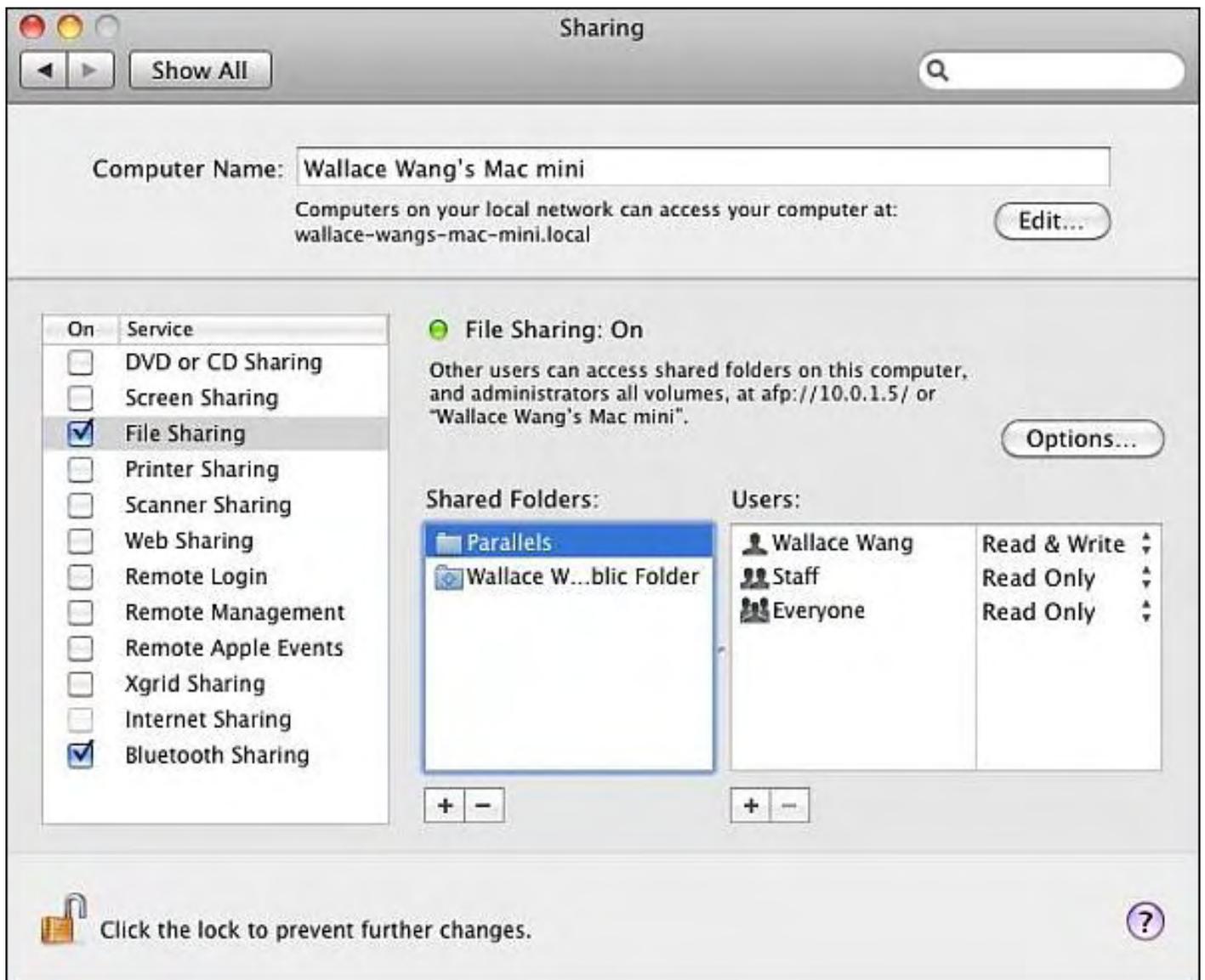


Figure 2. The Sharing window lets you define what to share with others.

When turning on File Sharing, you can further protect your files by defining which users can access your files and whether they have read-only access or read/write privileges as well.

For another way to share files, just store everything on a service like MobileMe. Put your files in a special Public folder, password-protect them, and give out your password to everyone who needs access to that file.

If you want to share your iTunes music library with others, get Apple's AirPort Express. This will not only acts as a wireless router so you can share an Internet connection, but it also lets you share files wirelessly and stream music from one computer's iTunes library. Now each computer can keep its own music library and share rather than make duplicate copies.



Figure 3. Using AirPort Express to share music and files in a home network.

Unlike a business network that's designed to increase productivity, a home network is more designed for entertainment along with the ability to share printers, hard disks and Internet connections. You probably don't need a home network, but chances are good that once you see what it can do, you'll probably just want one anyway. If you need help setting up a network at home, check out *The Little Network Book for Windows and Macintosh* (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0201353784?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0201353784) by Lon Poole and John Rizzo. (This book was first printed in 1999 and is now out of date, but the principles discussed still make sense. Look for a used copy rather than buy a new one.)

Typing on the iPad

This entire column was written completely on the virtual keyboard of the iPad. Initially, getting used to this virtual keyboard took time, just as switching from a typewriter to a computer keyboard took time.

Most typewriter keyboards slope upward and require more physical force to press than a computer keyboard. The first time I tried typing on a computer keyboard, my fingers kept flying up past the keys and hitting the number keys by mistake since I was so used to the slope of a typewriter keyboard. Eventually I adjusted to the point where using a typewriter keyboard seems foreign and so difficult.

Typing on a virtual keyboard offers similar challenges. First of all, you can't rest your fingers on the home row of keys or else the virtual keyboard will type a flurry of letters. Instead, you have to practice keeping your fingertips hovering over the keyboard without touching it.

A second challenge is moving the cursor. On a computer keyboard, it's second nature to press one of the four cursor movement keys (up, down, left, and right). On the iPad's virtual keyboard, there are no cursor keys. Instead, you have to learn and master the ability to tap to place the cursor, or press and slide your finger to precisely place the cursor within

text.

More annoying is that the virtual keyboard can't display all characters at once, so to type an apostrophe requires switching to a different virtual keyboard and tapping the apostrophe key. Then the normal letter virtual keyboard automatically pops back on the screen again.

Using the Shift key is different as well. On a normal keyboard, you can hold down the Shift key and then tap the key you want to capitalize. On the virtual keyboard, you just need to tap the Shift key once and then the next key you type will appear capitalized. To simplify typing, the virtual keyboard automatically capitalizes the first letter of each sentence.

Since typing on the virtual keyboard can feel so imprecise, chances are good that you'll misspell more than your fair share of words. To fix this problem, the virtual keyboard displays correct spellings of words as you type, which you can select by tapping the space bar and letting the virtual keyboard finish typing the word for you. In case of spelling errors, the virtual keyboard highlights misspelled words with a red squiggly line. Tapping these misspelled words displays a menu of possible correct spellings. Just tap the spelling you want and the virtual keyboard fixes it right away.

After using this virtual keyboard for an extended period of time, ordinary physical keyboards are starting to feel strange. Typing on the flat, glass surface of the iPad is surprisingly easy and comfortable. Eventually, virtual keyboards will become the norm and physical keyboards will start to look antiquated and obsolete.

According to the latest survey by J.D. Powers (news.cnet.com/8301-1035_3-20001570-94.html), more people prefer using touchscreens on their smartphones than traditional physical keyboards. (Remember when people like Steve Ballmer, Microsoft's CEO, ridiculed the iPhone for its lack of a physical keyboard? Now remember all those iPad critics who said the iPad would fail without a physical keyboard?) That pattern will likely repeat itself with laptop computers as people realize the benefits of a virtual keyboard and acknowledge the limitations of a physical keyboard.

A physical keyboard just isn't as flexible as a virtual keyboard. As virtual keyboards get smarter, physical keyboards will always remain static, which means virtual keyboards will eventually become the preferred method of input. It might not happen with today's iPad, but it's going to happen eventually. The sooner you adapt to virtual keyboards, the less likely you'll fall behind in the future.

The iPhone vs. The iPad

Although the iPad can run any iPhone app, you'll probably want to use iPad-specific apps instead. The problem is that iPhone apps are meant to fill the tinier screen of the iPhone and solve a single problem, like finding the cheapest gas station near your current location or helping you order food from a restaurant like Pizza Hut.

In comparison, iPad apps tend to be more ambitious and nearly approaching the functionality of ordinary computer programs. Apple has already ported its iWork suite (Pages, Numbers and Keynote) to the iPad, while Adobe has created a simple drawing program called Adobe Ideas, which essentially turns your iPad into a sketching surface. Buy a separate stylus and your iPad is now an electronic canvas for painting, sketching, or drawing. While Adobe Ideas is a free iPad app, Autodesk has released a more comprehensive sketching tool called SketchBook Pro (\$7.99), which nearly rivals Photoshop or Corel Painter in allowing you to create art on the iPad.



Figure 4. Autodesk's SketchBook Pro turns an iPad into a painting surface.

For every person who can't figure out what to use an iPad for, there are probably dozens more who have not only figured out what to use an iPad for, but are probably already busy creating apps to take advantage of its unique form.

The iPhone merely pointed the way to how programs might behave on a touchscreen surface. The iPad is simply providing a new paradigm for creative minds to explore.

* * *

There are two ways to rename a file on a Macintosh. The first and clumsiest way is to right-click on a file that you want to rename, and when a pop-up menu appears, choose Get Info. Inside this Info window that pops up you'll be able to edit the current file's name.

An even simpler method is to click on a file that you want to rename and press the Return key to highlight the file name. Now you can edit that file name or type a completely new file name. When you're done, just press the Return key to save your changes.

In the early days, before Wally became an Internationally renowned comedian, computer book writer, and generally cool guy, Wally Wang used to hang around The Byte Buyer dangling participles with Jack Dunning and go to the gym to pump iron with Dan Gookin.

Wally is responsible for the following books:

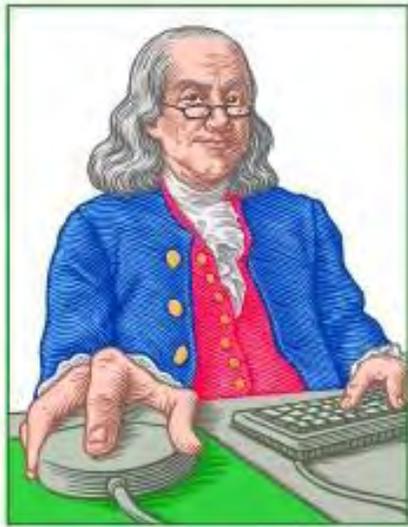
- Microsoft Office 2007 for Dummies (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470009233?)

- ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470009233*),
- Beginning Programming for Dummies ([www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470088702?](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470088702?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470088702)
ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470088702),
 - Breaking Into Acting for Dummies with Larry Garrison ([www.amazon.com/gp/product/0764554468?](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0764554468?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0764554468)
ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0764554468), Beginning Programming All-in-One Reference for Dummies ([www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470108541?](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470108541?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470108541)
ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470108541),
 - Steal This Computer Book 4.0 ([www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271050?](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271050?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271050)
ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271050),
 - Visual Basic Express 2005: Now Playing ([www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593270593?](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593270593?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593270593)
ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593270593),
 - My New Mac (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271646?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271646),
 - My New iPhone (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271956?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271956),
 - Strategic Entrepreneurism with Jon Fisher and Gerald Fisher ([www.amazon.com/gp/product/1590791894?](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1590791894?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1590791894)
ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1590791894).

When not performing stand-up comedy or writing computer books, he likes to paper trade stocks with the video game Stock Reflex (www.plimus.com/jsp/download_trial.jsp?contractId=1722712&referrer=wwang), using the techniques he learned from a professional Wall Street day trader.

In his spare time, Wally likes blogging about movies and writing screenplays at his site "The 15 Minute Movie Method." (www.15minutemoviemethod.com/) Wally can be reached at wally@computoredge.com.

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LINUX LESSONS

**"AN INVESTMENT
IN LINUX KNOWLEDGE
PAYS THE BEST
INTEREST."**

Linux Lessons: Tips and Tricks from Users

"Postfix: Software for setting up an e-mail server on Linux computers." by Jack Dunning

If you're planning to host an e-mail server on a Linux computer, Postfix is definitely worth taking a look at.

One of the best things about Linux computers is not just the availability of free software, but the quality of the programs. One of the ways that we use our *ComputerEdge* servers is for e-mail. We can assign our own e-mail addresses with the computoredge.com domain. When hooked into our VPN (Virtual Private Network), we can pick up and send e-mail from anywhere in the world without being forced to use Web mail. But to do all this, a solid e-mail server is required. That's what we have in Postfix.

Postfix (www.postfix.org) was designed to work in a way similar to Sendmail (www.sendmail.org) without being quite as clunky and hard to manage. Sendmail is considered the standard for e-mail servers primarily because it is used on so many Unix-like servers. It is the default server for most Unix-like servers. Initially, *ComputerEdge* used Sendmail, because it was there. However, it is a little difficult to configure (at least it was when we first set up our servers). We made the choice to install Postfix and we have never looked back. Both Sendmail and Postfix are free to download and use.

Postfix includes a number of features to protect against spammers. When configured properly it will block a vast majority of traffic before it ever gets anywhere. If there is a problem with an e-mail account, it generates an error e-mail which is automatically sent back to the sender. (This is a pretty standard feature for e-mail servers.) We have never had a problem with the Postfix server and I don't recall it ever crashing.

The following is a display from a short script we wrote to check the activity in the daily logs:

Rejected Mail	20943
Rejected Spamhaus	4749
Rejected Ignorant	27
Accepted Mail	206
Response Mail	64

"Rejected Mail" is activity that is outright rejected by Postfix based upon basic factors checked before the message are put into the system. Much of that could be probing by other systems. There will easily be 30,000 to 40,000 of these a day. "Rejected Spamhaus" are e-mails that get through the initial checks, then fail validation with the blacklists at The Spamhaus Project (www.spamhaus.org), an organization dedicated to stomping out spam. (Spamhaus is an interesting site worth checking out.) On our small e-mail server, 5,000 to 7,000 messages a day are blocked through Spamhaus. "Rejected Ignorant" are additional e-mail checks that block a few more. "Accepted Mail" is the number of e-

mails (including spam) that make it through to the queue. They are either delivered to the mailboxes or rejected based upon other internal criteria. "Response Mail" would be any mail that is not delivered and gets an automatic rejection notice.

On the days that *ComputerEdge* e-mail subscriptions go out, they would appear in the "Accepted Mail" category, since the Web server, as an e-mail client, initiates the mailings to the e-mail server.

If you're planning to host an e-mail server on a Linux computer, Postfix is definitely worth taking a look at. I'm not familiar with all of its features, of which there are many, but maybe others could comment on their experiences.

Jack is the publisher of *ComputerEdge* Magazine. He's been with the magazine since first issue on May 16, 1983. Back then, it was called *The Byte Buyer*. His Web site is www.computoredge.com. He can be reached at ceeditor@computoredge.com

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Rob, The Computer Tutor

Rob, The ComputerTutor: Technology Solutions

“JavaScript in Action: Form-Level Validation” by Rob Spahitz

Last week we completed looking at field-level validation. This week we look at form-level validation, which includes things like making sure dependencies are filled in and that mandatory fields are supplied.

Last week we completed looking at field-level validation. This week we look at form-level validation, which includes things like making sure dependencies are filled in and that mandatory fields are supplied.

Responses

First, a few messages from my loyal readers.

Bob W. wrote: "How do you get search engines to find you? I'm specifically interested in blogs. Do you have any hints for getting noticed?"

Bob, this is something that *ComputerEdge* has attempted to address a few times, so you can check the archives. The biggest problem is that there is no single answer to this. It's like asking the question, "How do I become famous?" Sometimes fame finds you; sometimes you try and try and try to get famous and nothing happens; sometimes you just need a good agent, and that can cost money. In the world wide Internet, sometimes people find you, sometimes you can promote yourself to friends or through *ComputerEdge* articles, and you may still not get much attention. Other times you might use an agent, like a Web ad or by submitting your site to a search engine.

The problem with search engines is that they each have their own criteria for what makes your Web site appear at the top of the list. Some check how often you use certain keywords, some check for special words in the HTML, and some check for how many times other people's Web sites reference yours. I suppose that the answer to getting noticed is to create a blog that is so interesting that your friends want to share it with their friends and their friends and more and more until the media picks it up. And if I knew how to do that, I'd have been famous a long time ago.

Good luck Bob, and when you're famous, don't forget the little people who helped you get there.

Ron N. of El Cajon, CA writes: "Can you offer any suggestions for good Web site designing freeware?"

I'll turn to my readers for help on this. E-mail me your suggestions and a quick review, and I'll see about posting a few of them. Meanwhile, I previously mentioned that the version of Dreamweaver I played with was too expensive for the average Web site builder and had major problems with frames and tables. (I don't think I'm too stupid to figure it out, so I'm calling the software inadequate!) Similarly, FrontPage seems to have only had one good version, FP2000, which is now 10 years old and in need of updates. The newer versions seem to have lost something and got pushed aside for Microsoft's Web Developer tool, a free download. I consider it one of the most horrible tools I've ever used from Microsoft. And Microsoft Word can do Web pages (pretty bloated) but not really Web sites.

That leaves us with a collection of side projects from companies like Netscape (that never really took off) and a host of products that simply don't offer the features that the average beginner needs. So let me quickly throw out a list of things that I think would be useful, and if nobody out there sends any good suggestions, I may just end up writing my own.

A good Web site builder should contain the following: a text editor that encourages you to use HTML-compliant elements without requiring it; the ability to drag-and-drop text, pictures, tables, forms and other HTML elements; the ability to show multiple pages that, together, become a Web site; a find feature that spans multiple pages; the ability to preview any page against any of the current and recent browsers including IE8, Firefox 3.6, Chrome, Opera, Safari, IE7, IE6, Netscape and even the iPhone; the ability to view text in HTML mode; the ability to manage style sheets (similar to Word's paragraph styles); a tool for managing scripts (probably just JavaScript but maybe also VBScript); a feature to support plug-ins like Flash; and a good tool for managing your uploads to the server. Would you pay \$29.95 for a professional tool like this? Let me know. And let me know what features I may have missed that you'd like to see.

Form Validation

On to this week's topic. In case you missed it, form validation is the way that we test all of the fields on a form to ensure that everything is reasonably correct before submitting it to the server for processing. We previously handled field-level validation, which ensures that the data in a single field is valid, but sometimes users may skip fields that require information so the field never gets validated; other times a field's value may depend on other settings. Let's tackle each of these when the Submit button is clicked rather than when the user leaves the field.

First, let's add a few parts to get a form with four fields. Let's say that you want to validate an address that contains Street, City, State and ZIP Code. Maybe you require that the City must be entered and that the ZIP code must match the correct State. I'll leave out the <html>, <head> and <body> tags; you should include those when creating your page.

```
<form>
<p>Street: <input type="text" name="Street" size="50" /></p>
<p>City: <input type="text" name="City" size="25" /></p>
<p>State:
<select name="State">
  <option value="">(Select a state)</option>
  <option value="CA">California</option>
  <option value="CO">Colorado</option>
  <option value="NM">New Mexico</option>
</select>
</p>
<p>Zip Code: <input type="text" name="ZipCode" size="10" /></p>
<p>
<input type="submit" value="Submit" />
<input type="reset" value="Clear" />
</p>
</form>
```

Note that you can handle the entire page's validation when the form is submitted, but often it makes sense to handle field validation combined with form validation if done carefully. Just avoid doing things that annoy your users while they are entering data (like popping up message after message as users navigate through the fields), or they are likely to go away and find another Web page that's less annoying. This is also why many Web forms include asterisks (*) next to the fields that are required: so users know what must be filled in without getting too many annoying form-level validation messages.

If you run the above Web form, there is nothing to require that you enter a City and there's no way to force the user to go to the City field without using form-level validation. To handle this, the best thing to do is to add some JavaScript code when the users click on the Submit button, so change the Submit button to this:

```
<input type="submit" value="Submit" onClick="validateForm()" />
```

Obviously, this will need a procedure to handle the form validation, so add a block to the header something like this:

```
<script language="JavaScript">
function validateForm()
{
    alert("validating")
}
</script>
```

Now if you click on the Submit button, you should see a dialog box showing the word in the alert function, "validating."

Taking this further, we want to check all of the form-level requirements. For us, that's simply ensuring that the City has a value and that the ZIP code is in the right state. Although you can code all of that directly into the above validateForm function, a better approach is to write more modular code. The modular approach lets you manage the code better because each block has fewer lines of code; it also lets you handle validation from multiple places without duplicating the code. For example, the code to ensure that the city is filled in can be processed at the form level and also from the City field (when the user leaves the field). By sharing the code, you only have to write it once and use it as many times as needed. For this reason, I'll simply add two function calls in the above routine (and comment-out the alert since we know it's working, but I may want to use it for other things later and want to minimize the amount of work needed to add and remove lines of code used for testing):

```
function validateForm()
{
//    alert("validating")
    checkCityField();
    checkStateZipCode();
}
```

We don't have to work on all of the code now, but you should at least "stub" them out by adding the function without any code in it:

```
function checkCityField()
{
}
function checkStateZipCode()
{
}
```

Given the above, if you re-run the Web form, nothing much will happen when you submit since it will call the validateForm function which, in turn, will call checkCityField (which does nothing) and checkStateZipCode (which also does nothing).

Empty Field Validation

Let's work on the City validation first since we previously tackled something like this:

```
function checkCityField()
{
    if(document.forms[0].elements["City"].value.length < 1)
    {
        alert("The City must be entered.");
        document.forms[0].elements["City"].focus();
        return(false);
    }
    return(true);
}
```

This will check the length of the City field. If it is less than one character, then there is no City in the field. In that case we want to send a message about what to do (enter the City), move the cursor back to the field, then return. Notice that I am returning a value of "false," which can be used to cancel the submit command (otherwise we'll return true, meaning to continue processing and submit). For the cancellation of the "submit" to work, we'll need to update a few more lines. Back in the validateForm function, change the checkCityField function call as follows:

```
bResult = checkCityField();
if (!bResult)
{
    return(bResult);
}
```

Now when the checkCityField function completes, it returns either true or false and we store it in a Boolean variable called bResult (with the "b" prefixed commonly used to identify a Boolean—true/false—condition and "Result" seeming like as good a name as any for the variable). We then check so see if the variable is "not true" (where the "!" is JavaScript for "not") and if so then return from the validation routine with the false (i.e., "not true") setting. To complete things we'll need to return this to the Submit button, so change the onClick like this:

```
<input type="submit" value="Submit" onClick="return(validateForm())" />
This will now help with the State-ZIP Code validation.
```

Dependent Field Validation

With this in place, we can now work on the other piece. Our goal with checkStateZipCode is to ensure that the entered ZIP Code is located in the selected State. Although this could be a very extensive procedure, I will keep it limited. Since we are using only a few States in our case, I will work only with those. As best as I can find, CA uses ZIP Codes in the range of 90001 through 96199, CO uses 80001 to 81999, and NM uses 87001 to 88499. Obviously finding correct information for such a validation is a key element of getting it right. However, we could always implement this and update it further as we get more information. Just note that if you implement something like this and get it wrong, you may prevent users from entering correct information. Since this is just an exercise, we'll proceed anyway.

First let's fix the last part of the validateForm for the state/zip code:

```

bResult = checkStateZipCode();
if (!bResult)
{
    return(bResult);
}
return(true);

```

If the State-ZIP Code validation fails, we'll again return that false condition; otherwise we'll fall through to the next test (which we don't have so we're done), then finally return "true" to indicate that the validation was a success. Note that there are several ways this code could be written; as with most computer code, this is one way.

Back at the function at hand, fix the checkStateZipCode function as follows:

```

function checkStateZipCode()
{
    strStateCode = document.forms[0].elements["State"].value;
    strZipCode = document.forms[0].elements["ZipCode"].value;
    if((strStateCode == "CA" && (strZipCode > 90000 && strZipCode < 96200))
    || (strStateCode == "CO" && (strZipCode > 80000 && strZipCode < 82000))
    || (strStateCode == "NM" && (strZipCode > 87000 && strZipCode < 88500))
    )
    {
        return(true);
    }
    alert("The Zip Code must be correct for the specified State.");
    document.forms[0].elements["ZipCode"].focus();
    return(false);
}

```

This time I decided to capture the two fields that we are trying to validate and save them in some string (text) variables named strStateCode and strZipCode. Then, unlike the previous function, I decided to check for valid conditions and return "true" if we have success; otherwise fall through and show the message indicating that the pieces do not match before sending back a "false" value.

Although the condition that we check is somewhat complex, I'm sure you can figure it out if you look carefully, especially with the way I organized it. In this case, I check to see if the State Code is a specific one I'd like to test (like CA) then check to see if the ZIP Code is in the allowable range. If all is good, we have a true condition because the rest of the checks use the "OR" (||) test and any "true" piece in an "OR" condition results in a "true" result.

If the first case is false (meaning the State Code does not match the first case, and the ZIP Code is out of range), then we perform the next check. If that matches, we're done; otherwise we continue on.

The final JavaScript looks like this:

```

<script language="JavaScript">
function validateForm()
{

```

```
// alert("validating")
bResult = checkCityField();
if (!bResult)
{
    return(bResult);
}
bResult = checkStateZipCode();
if (!bResult)
{
    return(bResult);
}
return(true);
}
function checkCityField()
{
    if(document.forms[0].elements["City"].value.length < 1)
    {
        alert("The City must be entered.");
        document.forms[0].elements["City"].focus();
        return(false);
    }
    return(true);
}
function checkStateZipCode()
{
    strStateCode = document.forms[0].elements["State"].value;
    strZipCode = document.forms[0].elements["ZipCode"].value;
    if((strStateCode == "CA" && (strZipCode > 90000 && strZipCode < 96200))
    || (strStateCode == "CO" && (strZipCode > 80000 && strZipCode < 82000))
    || (strStateCode == "NM" && (strZipCode > 87000 && strZipCode < 88500))
    )
    {
        return(true);
    }
    alert("The Zip Code must be correct for the specified State.");
    document.forms[0].elements["ZipCode"].focus();
    return(false);
}
</script>
```

And don't forget this change:

```
<input type="submit" value="Submit" onClick="return(validateForm())" />
```

Next week, we'll examine a few other things we can do with JavaScript as we explore how to manipulate parts of the screen to do things that people can do with Flash. Meanwhile, remember to send reviews of your favorite Web site development tool.

Rob has been in the computer industry for over 25 years and is currently a part-time teacher, offering classes in Excel, Access, Visual Basic, and a variety of other technical tools. He has loved *ComputerEdge* since 1990 and can be contacted at *RSpahitz@Dogopoly.com*.

Looking for a great boardgame? Grab a copy from DOGOPOLY.com (*dogopoly.com*) and have a dog-gone great time.



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Spam of the Week

Spam of the Week

“The latest in annoying and dangerous e-mail currently making the rounds.” by ComputerEdge Staff

Is Tiger Woods endorsing cheap Rolex watches? Nah, it's just the latest spam making the rounds.

Apparently Tiger Woods is doing OK with the sponsors—at least those that are offering fake Rolex watches (see Figure 1). We threw this spam in not because there were a lot of them, but because we wanted to see what Tiger is up to. Tiger may be endorsing Rolex, but we doubt if Rolex is endorsing this spam. Our guess is that, as usual, Tiger has nothing to do with any of these—nor are they real Rolex watches.

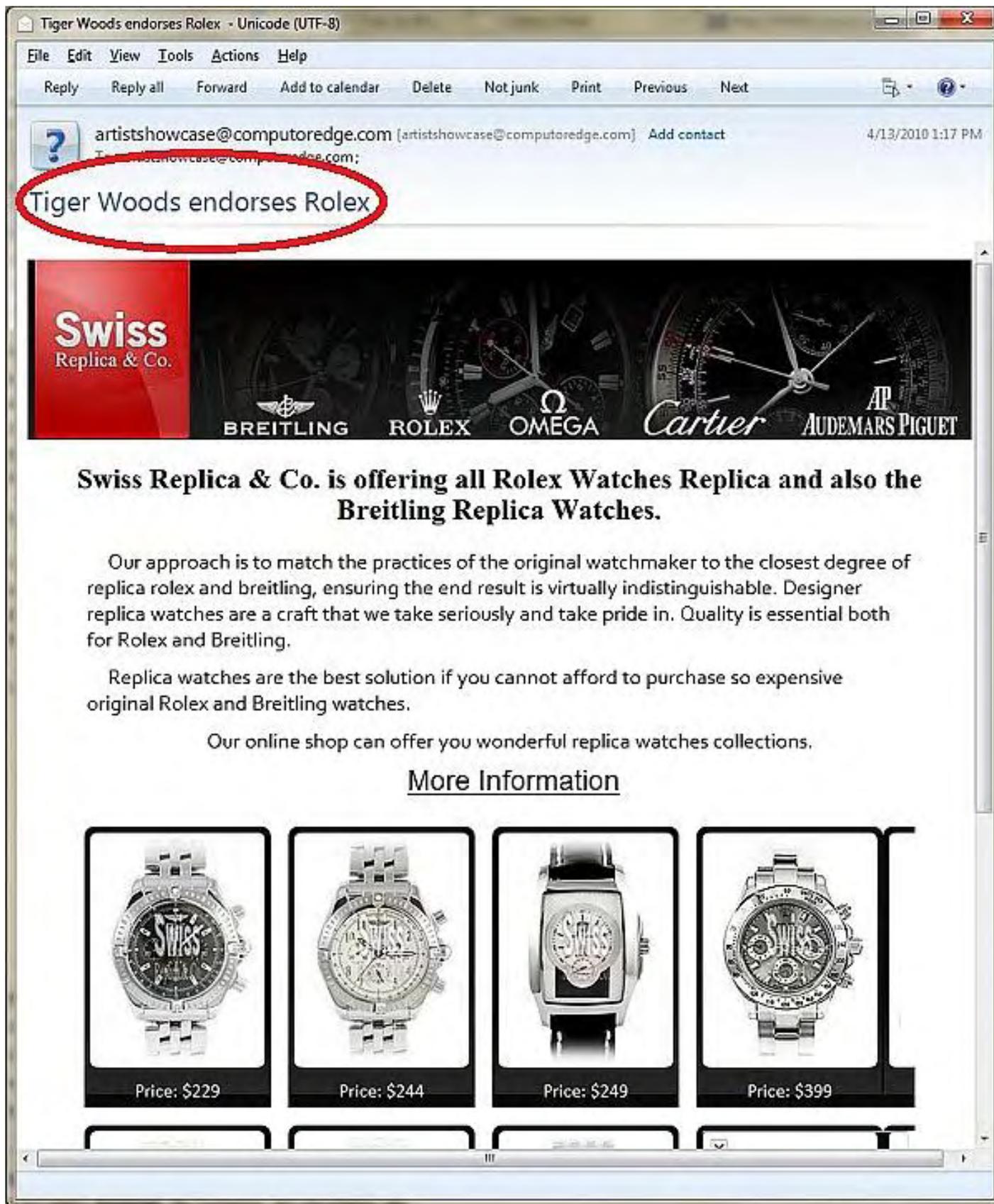


Figure 1. Tiger Woods Rolex spam.

We're speculating that this spam may actually be selling fake watches, but they could just as easily be looking for free money—from you! We didn't bother to see where the links lead because we didn't want to go there. We also get a ton of spam from online pharmacies offering little blue pills.

If your spam filter doesn't catch them (Windows Live did), then just delete them.

ComputerEdge always wants to hear from you, our readers. If you have specific comments about one of our articles, please click the "Tell us what you think about this article!" link at the top or bottom of the article/column. Your comments will be attached to the column and may appear at a later time in the "Editor's Letters" section.

If you want to submit a short "ComputerQuick Review", or yell at us, please e-mail us at *ceeditor@computoredge.com*.

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EdgeWord: HP and the Printhead Warranty--A Personal Saga



“Sometimes “no” means no customer service.” by Jack Dunning

Jack recounts a frustrating customer-service saga with HP after a faulty printhead's expiration data is missed by hours.

This week I'm writing about a situation that occurred last week with HP (Hewlett-Packard). I'm writing about this incident not merely to whine about a support problem or to get any redress from HP. My primary motivations are twofold. First, there are learning points that I can pass on to *ComputerEdge* readers. These may help if you find yourself in a similar situation. Second, I would encourage HP to review some of its policies in the name of improving customer relations.

HP makes quality products. I've purchased a number of their computers and printers over the past years (decades) and have generally been very happy with them. I am not complaining about HP products. I currently own an HP printer, which has been an excellent printer. The printer is almost two years old and is no longer under warranty.

On April 8, I started experiencing problems with the printer. I was getting the message that the black-and-yellow printhead was faulty. I looked up instructions for cleaning the printhead, pulled the cartridge out, did a little clean-up, and then reinserted it into the printer. It started working again. I was pleased with the results, but I should have checked things a little closer. At a minimum, I should have read the writing on the printhead cartridge. However, I had to move on to other things, so I didn't get back to the printer until two days later—April 10.

When I next attempted to print, I received the same message about the printhead problem. I repeated some of the same steps I had taken previously, but this time there was no luck. I knew that it was time to get a new printhead. I started checking the Web and found a number of sources at prices ranging from \$50 to over \$70. I finally pulled the printhead out of the printer to get the specific model information.

To my surprise, there was a separate warranty expiration date on the printhead cartridge (see Figure 1). I had assumed that since the printer was well out of warranty, the printhead would also not be covered. Who knew? This is the first learning point. There could be parts in your printer that have a different warranty from the printer itself. If you're having a problem, be sure to check the components carefully. I should have.



Figure 1. The recalcitrant HP printhead.

To my chagrin, the warranty expiration date on the printhead had passed only hours before. If I had paid attention two days before when the problem first occurred, I would have been set. However, I reasoned that since the problem started while it was still under warranty, HP would certainly be agreeable and honor it. I called HP support.

The support people were very sympathetic to my situation, but the rules are the rules. If a warranty is expired (even by a few minutes), it is simply company policy not to honor it. "Even if, based upon the facts, it seems to be a reasonable request?" "Sorry, it's out of our hands." He talked to his supervisor. I talked to his supervisor. I wondered if they would have made an exception if I had been in an accident and laid up in the hospital when the warranty expired? Nope. Not even with a doctor's note. It's HP policy.

I eventually did order a new printhead. (To HP's credit, they do include free overnight shipping for the \$70-plus cartridge.) But, when something annoys me, I'm not the type of person to leave it there. It just sticks in my craw when a company that could easily adopt policies that would promote excellent customer relations decides to turn its employees into automatons and embed the rules in stone.

I've dealt with many big companies on a variety of issues. I always try to be reasonable, even if I'm not technically right—i.e., warranty out of date. I've found that most corporations either allow their customer representatives a modicum of freedom to



"His warranty had expired fifteen minutes

J. Whiting

“His warranty had expired fifteen minutes before he called and he still thought he could get support! That’s a good one!”

make decisions and resolve problems, or they have a special department that can evaluate your case for its merits. Once at one company where I had a situation, I was told by the company rep that there was no one in the entire company who could rule in

my favor. I asked if the president of the company could do it. The rep said, "Oh, he could, but he's not going to talk to you!" Eventually, I did find the right people who could make a decision, and they found my request reasonable.

I did send an e-mail to HP's president via the Web site, but the warnings on the page led me to believe that I would be directed to a special folder in Outlook for the thousands of other people who also wanted to escalate their complaints.

A couple of days later I called HP support back to get either another number to call or another e-mail address. At this point, I only wanted to confirm that the black-and-white warranty rule was indeed corporate policy and not the doings of a rogue support department. Again, the rep was very sympathetic and eventually, after consulting behind the scenes for a few minutes, she gave me what appeared to be a secret e-mail address. I thanked her and composed an e-mail similar to the one I had sent to the president.

I did receive a call back from someone at the secret e-mail address. She did confirm that it was indeed HP policy not to honor any warranty that was even one minute past expiration. (She may not have used those exact words. I was simultaneously on another line with a different big company, Verizon, who was happily resolving a totally different problem I was having.) There was a crack in the wall when she suggested that maybe they could send me a printhead cartridge. I responded that it was a bit too late since I had already ordered a new one. All I wanted was confirmation on the policy.

When a company makes policies that are so stringent that the support people are not allowed any wiggle room in their decision making, they not only generate dissatisfaction among reasonable customers, but they frustrate their own employees. Rather than being challenged to resolve issues and help the company reputation, representatives become depressed after being hammered for enforcing rules over which they have no control. Eventually, this type of corporate climate will take its toll on both the company's reputation and its employees.

If I were to ask anything of HP, it would be that it reconsider its draconian approach to customer service policies. Give your reps some decision-making authority. This change would reap many benefits.

The truth is that it would be very difficult for HP to make such changes in their customer service policies. No doubt there are HP bosses who believe it's foolish to give reps too much authority. It's easier to put in place absolute rules which require no decisions, than to implement guidelines requiring individual judgement. Additionally, in such large organizations the way of business becomes ingrained. Even minor changes can cause major upheaval. No doubt there are some customer service reps who prefer the comfort of crystal clear (never crossed) lines.

I'll let you judge whether I was reasonable or not. I was technically outside the rules. If I had never seen the warranty date on the cartridge, I would never have engaged in this expedition. Plus, I would never have experienced the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach when my request was refused.

Note: The new printhead arrived and its expiration date is February 17, 2012. I'm putting February 16, 2012 in my calendar with an e-mail alert.

Jack is the publisher of *ComputerEdge* Magazine. He's been with the magazine since first issue on May 16, 1983. Back then, it was called *The Byte Buyer*. His Web site is www.computoredge.com. He can be reached at ceeditor@computoredge.com

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EDITOR'S LETTERS

Editor's Letters: Tips and Thoughts from Readers

“Computer and Internet tips, plus comments on the articles and columns.” by ComputerEdge Staff

"VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) Basics," "Using Skype Overseas?,"
"Vonage Experiences"

VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) Basics

[Regarding Michael J. Ross' March 19 article, "VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) Basics":]

Your article is well written, but you are leaving out a third provider, magicJack. It functions along the same lines as Vonage, but I have found it to be much cheaper. Initial setup is about \$40. (\$20, for equipment and \$20 for the first year of service, then it's \$19.95 per year after that). So what you're looking at is approximately \$1.70 per month for phone service. This is provided that you're using cable/DSL service for your Internet provider. The drawback I have found is that SAT connections (DirecTV or Dish Network) do not work well with it.

-Dave Vail, King George, VA

You need to check your math. I've been using Skype for several years as my long-distance server. I pay only \$2.95/month for unlimited North America calling (it would be \$9.95 for worldwide calling). A Skype in number costs \$1.35. The \$30 I save over AT&T, pays for my 5MB/s DSL. I also speak to friends around the world who have Skype for free. Also, when using speakers as your sound output, you need to pay attention to speaker/mic placement to avoid feedback. I prefer a headset to avoid feedback.

-Paula

The article gives an inaccurate picture of what is available. It uses Vonage as its prime example, yet that service loses out on all counts when compared with magicJack. Also, the rhetorical question of "How do you call your Internet provider when the service goes out" will be a non-issue nearly all of the time because VoIP does not replace a cell phone. The same goes for comparing the sound quality and loss of a signal with that of a cell phone while driving through a tunnel. That's comparing apples and oranges. I pay \$20/year for magicJack calls anywhere in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico, and two cents per minute for calls to Japan where my wife has family. For missed messages, I receive an e-mail with both text and sound files. To me, this all seems much superior to Vonage, yet you do not even mention it.

-Richard Hardy, San Diego, CA

You missed Ooma (www.ooma.com). There is no monthly fee unless you sign up for the Premier service plan; the total cost is the cost for the Ooma box. [It offers] unlimited long distance in the U.S. I had one since December and it works for me.

-Kenneth, San Diego, CA

I've been having a VoIP quality problem that the article didn't adequately cover. Around the first of the year and after researching the options, I went with Ooma, which has a higher front-end cost with no monthly bills). While voices sound great, about once a week (on average, but sometimes in clusters), I experience several drop-out problems on the upload

side of the connection where I can hear fine, but the person on the other side of the conversation can't make out what I'm saying.

When I'm experiencing this, the only way to complete the call is to hang up and make the call on my cell instead. Typically, Ooma says it's a Comcast (Louisville, CO) problem and Comcast says it Ooma's. I personally think it's Comcast, but I can't prove it and they won't admit it. I've repeatedly run everything from connection speed tests to "jitter" tests, but the problem continues and no one will claim responsibility.

The problem is frequent enough and annoying enough that I now have no trust in my phone service and regret going with VoIP. In good conscience I can't and won't recommend that anyone switch to VoIP. There are clearly major bugs that haven't been worked out of VoIP yet.

-Ted, Louisville, CO

Good article, but you omitted what I believe to possibly be the best system—Ooma. The equipment price has dropped since its introduction several years ago. I have gotten rid of my landline and use only Ooma. It is *entirely free*, plus clear and has all the usual options. I have it hooked up to our house alarm and it works on our local 911 system (which I accidentally pushed once). You can get a second line for about \$100 annually, but we don't need it. Also it is hooked up *before* the computer, so it has the priority and works without the computer on. I love it. (Phone lines can go out too.)

-George, Hemet, CA

[Regarding Ted's comment on VoIP quality problems:]

I encountered the same issue two times. I fixed it by rebooting my router. So my guess is that it's not the Ooma. By the way, my connection is: cable modem/router/Ooma. If you have the Ooma in between the router and modem, you can try rebooting the modem.

-Kenneth, San Diego, CA

Been using VoIP for over 10 years and yes, in the start-up days it had many problems. I have used many different carriers, most of which have gone away. I'm now with Vonage and have been happy with them. I had Lingo before, but it could not supply my local area code two years ago.

-Gary, Las Cruces, NM

Article was informative; however, I have one point that needs to be brought out with your information concerning a Vonage account. In reviews of Vonage, you will find that most customers were happy with the service of the phone usage, but, for whatever reason, when it was necessary for them to cancel the service it became a nightmare. In my own instance, my father passed away, and it took over three months to get the service/billing canceled. Google "Vonage Complaints," read the reviews, and if you still decide to get a Vonage account, you know up front it will be an uphill battle to cancel.

-Bob, San Diego

Using Skype Overseas?

Does anyone know if you can use Skype when you are traveling overseas? I would like to use it in China, but I read somewhere that the Great Firewall of China blocks access to Skype.

-O. Berkeley, La Jolla

I did a little research, and it appears that you can use Skype in China. There is a special government version of Skype that allows the bureaucrats to listen in. Or, if you set up a VPN (Virtual Private Network), you can secretly (encrypted) use the regular Skype connection as if you are in a U.S. network.

As far as all the recommendations for other types of VoIP service (magicJack, Ooma), it is worth your time to Google "reviews" and "complaints" about all the services. There are issues such as quality, dropped calls, lost service in local areas, and upfront costs that are worth investigating before you make a decision.

-Jack Dunning , ComputerEdge

Vonage Experiences

[Regarding the March 19 EdgeWord: A Look at Vonage VoIP column:]

I can mirror Jack Dunning's experience on Vonage. I have had it for three years, some with Comcast cable and now with AT&T Uverse. Phone quality has been good and no problems with service. The extras like simultaneous ring (with the cell phone) make it that much better than a typical landline.

-Orlan, Chicago Area

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