



OSW / appiChar Technical Guide for IT Staff

Section 10: Help!

An important part of being able to solve a problem is knowing how to find answers when the subject is outside your normal area of expertise.

Contents:

- Asking Questions
- Forwarded emails, including virus scares
- Urban Legends



Don't Panic – How to Deal with Random Things

There are some things for which it would be a waste to use a normal support contract. Here are a few pointers to ways in which you can help yourself and get better value from you support providers if you do need to get in touch with them by having dealt with the obvious stuff already.

How To Ask Questions The Smart Way

Here are links to two articles which it is highly recommended you make the time to read. Neither of them is that long, they're not overly technical and should give you a useful insight in to the minds and workings of those people who *are* deeply technical.

<http://www.catb.org/~esr/faqs/smart-questions.html>

<http://www.chiark.greenend.org.uk/~sgtatham/bugs.html>

Forwarded Virus Scares The hoax as virus

A common problem, particularly when you have friends who aren't technically aware, is that they sometimes have a tendency to believe any old hoax they get sent, especially when they relate to a virus. When you get an email warning you of a virus there are a number of things you should do.

Firstly, check the web site of the company for your anti-virus software (of course you're using some...) and see if they mention it. It might be actually be a recent virus so if they have some kind of searchable database, check and see if it's there. If you can't find anything there, check a different vendor of AV software (just in case this is a real problem and they've been quicker at fixing it) and also have a quick search on Google.

Useful URLs:

AVG	http://www.grisoft.com
F-Prot	http://www.f-prot.com/virusinfo/
F-Secure	http://www.f-secure.com/virus-info/
McAfee	http://www.mcafee.com/anti-virus/default.asp
Symantec (Norton AntiVirus)	http://www.symantec.com/avcenter/index.html

Just this simple bit of research should only take a couple of minutes at most and will give you the confidence that there is no problem.

Don't Panic

An example hoax warning starts something like this (which if you haven't seen it already, you may well do!):

This information arrived this morning, from Microsoft and Norton. Please send it to everybody you know who accesses the Internet. You may receive an apparently harmless email with a PowerPoint presentation called "Life is beautiful.pps." If you receive it DO NOT OPEN THE FILE UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, and delete it immediately.

There are a number of classic "signs" you can look for in a message like this. The spurious use of real company names to make the message sound legitimate is the first. Go to the web sites for the companies mentioned and see if they have any mention of the alleged virus. Of course the sender wants you to send the message, that's how this "virus" really spreads. Are you expecting a file called "Life is beautiful.pps"? It's good practice to never open files you're not expecting, especially if they're from people you don't know. And so on. Don't be fooled and don't forward the message on to anyone else. You might consider replying to the person who "warned" you and give them the advice here so next time they won't be caught and won't waste any more of your time.

Urban Legends

It happened to a friend of a friend, so it must be true...

What's an urban legend (also sometimes known as a "dead granny")? There's a Usenet newsgroup dedicated to them and the alt.folklore.urban FAQ suggests:

"An urban legend:

- appears mysteriously and spreads spontaneously in varying forms
- contains elements of humor or horror (the horror often "punishes" someone who flouts society's conventions).
- makes good storytelling.
- does NOT have to be false, although most are. ULs often have a basis in fact, but it's their life after-the-fact (particularly in reference to the second and third points) that gives them particular interest."

Like the virus hoaxes, people forwarding round various other warnings and "information" can be a huge drain on time although at least sometimes they're amusing too. Again, before blindly forwarding these things on to all your friends (unless it's just for the entertainment value) please do a little research to check on the supposed facts in the message. As well as the usual Google (or your other preferred search engine) there are a couple of other resources worth checking:

<http://www.snopes.com/index.html>

<http://www.urbanlegends.com/> - The home of alt.folklore.urban