

Wireless Networks for the Rest of Us!

Home wireless networks are only for geeks, right? Think again.

Not so long ago, we could only move about as far as the phone cord would allow. Today, cordless phones let us talk while moving freely about the house and yard. And cell phones give us the freedom to make and receive phone calls from anywhere in the world at any time. Wireless networking—the next step in the evolution of communication devices—is the computer equivalent of the cordless phone.

While setting up a home wireless network to connect to the Internet is reason enough, it's only *one* reason to go wireless. The biggest benefit of wireless networking is mobility—the ability to use your laptop, Palm, or other device, from anywhere in the house or yard without being tethered to one place.

It's tax time: Take your laptop and shoebox full of receipts and spread out on the dining room table and file your tax return. Surf sports Web sites while sitting on the couch watching the Super Bowl. Working on your car in the garage? Take your laptop to the garage and access auto repair information. While cooking dinner, you can download a dessert recipe and check your email from a laptop on your kitchen counter! You get the picture.

Many people overlook a powerful benefit of home networking—sharing files and printers. No matter what brand your computers are, or what version of Windows they run, they can all share files and printers without being connected to the same computer by cables. Let's say, for example, that two adults and two teenagers each have their own computers. With a wireless network, all of them can print from a single printer and share files by placing documents or applications in a shared folder, which is visible on all of the networked computers.

Setting up a wireless network

Setting up a home wireless network was once expensive and not for the faint-of-heart. Prices are falling and devices are getting smaller. If you don't have the time or inclination to set up your own network, a computer or IT person can do it for you quickly and at a reasonable cost.

Both wired and wireless networks need to manage two connections: broadband Internet access and your internal home network. Think of them as the middleman between your home network and the Web. Wireless routers also have the additional responsibility to manage wireless

connectivity and security. In theory, your neighbor may be able to surf the Web on your dime. Configuring security protocols such as WEP or WPA at the router and your computers can help prevent intrusion.

Routers differ by brands but they all have browser-based setup pages so you can tell whether the router is successfully connected to the Web or not. You'll need a network card in each computer. Also known as Ethernet adapters, they come in both wired and wireless flavors. Newer computers have built-in network cards. Newer laptops may be equipped with wireless capability built-in.

What if I have cable or a DSL broadband connection?

A wireless router will manage your Internet connection and brings the Web to all of the computers in your home. It also provides a central point through which you can share files and printers, as well as easily add more computers.

What if I'm on dialup?

You won't use a router, but you can still share your Internet connection, files, and printers. One computer will need to function as a router by enabling ICS (Internet Connection Sharing), which requires Windows 98SE or higher (Windows 98 does not support connection sharing without a third-party proxy server application).

Tell me more!

Wireless networking is still in its infancy and the surface of its potential hasn't been scratched. Consider this:

- Soon, mobile phones may automatically switch to low-cost Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) when the phone comes within range of the subscribers' home network.
- Some of the newer personal digital assistants (PDAs) come with built-in wireless cards but if you have an older model, you can buy an adapter that will enable your PDA to fetch mail, browse the Web, and play streaming music. You can even download family photos from your computer to your PDA through wireless technology.
- A wireless device called a digital media adapter pulls photos and music from the family PC for display on the TV set, with the option of audio through a stereo system.

- Wireless adapters for the Xbox and PlayStation 2 video game consoles make it easy to challenge opponents who have an Internet connection, *anywhere in the world*.
- Hotspots, or wireless access points, are taking off like wildfire. Starbucks opened its first wired coffeehouse in August 2002. Now, it offers hotspots at 70 percent of its stores. McDonalds began serving high-speed access in March 2004 and is rapidly expanding its hotspot locations. By 2007, there will be 150,000 or more wireless access points around the country—in airports, libraries, books, college campuses, and even some city parks! Suppose that you are traveling for business and you need to check email. With a wireless-enabled laptop, you can stop at McDonalds for lunch you can check email, make hotel reservations for that night, and get the latest stock prices and football scores—from your virtual office! And in the time that it takes to eat a Big Mac and fries.

In the same way that cordless and cell phones spawned a significant lifestyle change— home wireless networking will have a profound effect on how where and how we use computers, and will undoubtedly open the door for exciting, innovative applications that make our lives easier.

And that's only the beginning...

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