

Fraught in the net

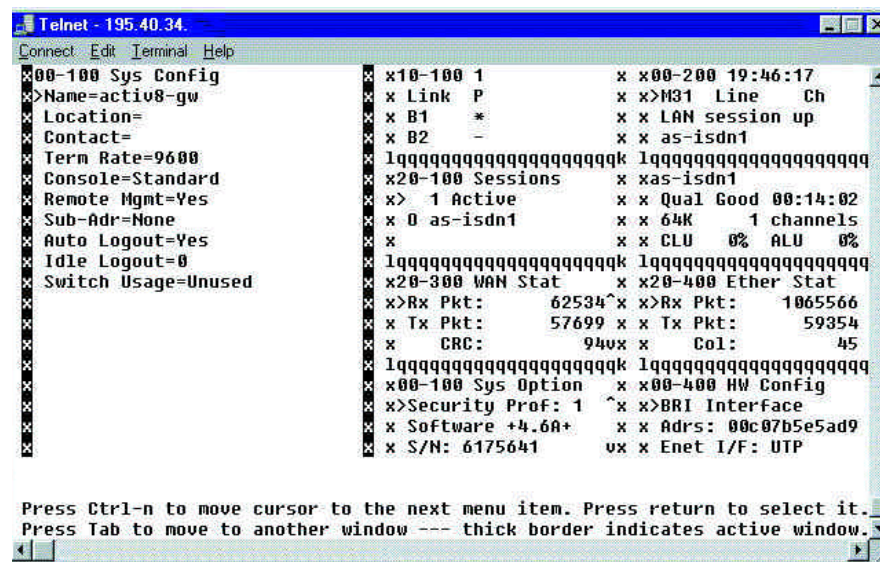
Getting connected to the internet can be a risky and potentially expensive business. Roger Gann takes the worry out of it with a back-to-basics brief on what's what and where to get it.

I guess a reasonably high proportion of *Personal Computer World* readers regularly access the internet from their PCs at home, using a V.34 modem and a normal phone line. Such an act would have been rocket science a few short years ago, but today it's a routine event. For single users, this method, a modem plus a conventional phone line, is the most cost-effective internet access solution. But what if you wanted to give internet access to a group of users, say those on a small network? Well, there's absolutely nothing to stop you from scaling up the single-user solution and applying it to everyone on the network, buying them all a modem, giving them all a phone line and their own ISP account. It's feasible, but it's a less than desirable solution. Not only would it be a nightmare to configure and administer, but it would also be expensive to implement.

No, a much more elegant solution is to integrate internet access into your network. The good news is that, depending on your

Router alternative

Installing TCP/IP on a lot of workstations is enough to make a network administrator cry. Luckily, Bay Networks has an alternative internet access solution for those wedded to the NetWare standard. Instant Internet 3.1 is an IP/IPX gateway server package, a hardware/software combination that allows NetWare users to access the internet without having to worry about configuring TCP/IP on top of an IPX stack. It effectively permits workstations to access the internet using just the NetWare IPX stack — only the Instant Internet server uses TCP/IP. The downside is that it's not particularly cheap — a 50 concurrent user ISDN version is priced at £4,329 and it can be awkward to configure. www.baynetworks.com/



Complicated or what? You can telnet in to your ISDN router once it's been configured, but as you can see, configuration isn't straightforward

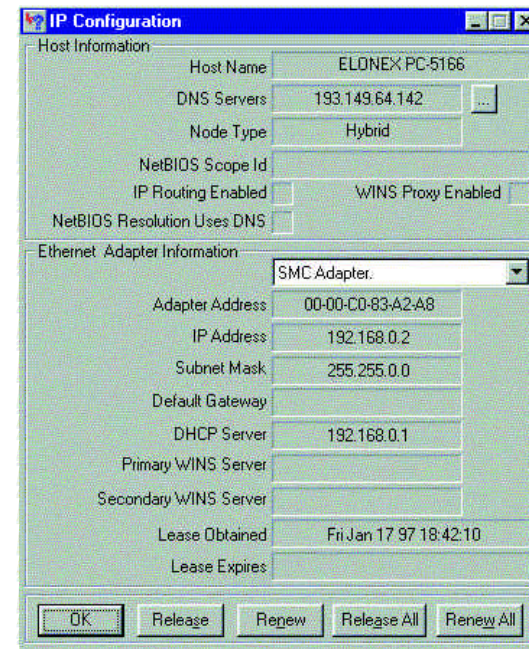
precise needs, you may not have to fork out for expensive new kit in order to do this. In fact, for most companies the expense will be relatively trivial. There are basically two choices available: email-only or full-blown internet connectivity.

Email only

I suspect most companies, even small ones, running even modest networks, rapidly appreciate the benefits of email, often provided as a standard feature in their NOS (e.g. Windows 95 or Windows for Workgroups 3.11) and soon find themselves making heavy use of internal email. So it makes a lot of sense to consider extending the existing email connectivity to embrace the internet — sending an email is probably the cheapest method of global communication available.

For email purposes you don't need

instant or continuous access to the internet, nor do you need a particularly fast connection: emails tend to be reasonably compact and the throughput offered by a 33.6Kbps modem will be perfectly adequate for most email traffic. However, if you get much email with large attachments, a faster connection is maybe worth considering. So, your hardware costs will be negligible. You'll also need a mail system that supports internet mail. A good, ubiquitous example of such a system is good old MS Mail, which offers basic email services and is supplied free with both Windows 95 and Windows 3.1x. It's possible to configure MS Mail to initiate a connection to your internet service provider via the modem at regular intervals, say every hour or so, to deliver new outgoing emails and to receive new incoming messages. To do this you simply add the



optional "Internet Mail" service to the Exchange Inbox client in Windows 95.

Such a setup is just dandy for standalone machines collecting their own personal email but it can't handle multiple internet email addresses on the network. What MS Mail needs is a bolt-on external mail package, one that can cope with POP3 (Post Office Protocol 3) and SMTP (Simple Mail Transport Protocol) mail systems offered by most ISPs. With such an add-on, every time MS Mail connects with the ISP's mail server, it downloads everybody's mail in one lump and then sorts it, placing the appropriate messages in the appropriate mailboxes. The result is transparency between internal and external email.

There are a number of these add-ons on the market. The European Microsoft Windows NT Academic Centre (EMWAC) based at Edinburgh University has developed EMWAC Internet Mail Services for Windows NT (along with a whole slew of other useful internet goodies). IMS is a suite of server programs which lets you use Windows NT as a mail server for internet mail. IMS isn't perfect — it requires Windows NT, of course, and can be a bit daunting to set up, but it does have the redeeming feature of being freeware. All the EMWAC goodies can be found at emwac.ed.ac.uk/.

Another alternative worth investigating is SLmail, developed on Bill's doorstep by Seattle Labs. This is available for all the Windows platforms, and a Windows 95 version (limited to six accounts) is available free from www.seattlelab.com/ (and is also

This undocumented goodie is supplied with Win95 and displays your PC's IP configuration, useful if you use DHCP on the server to allocate IP addresses

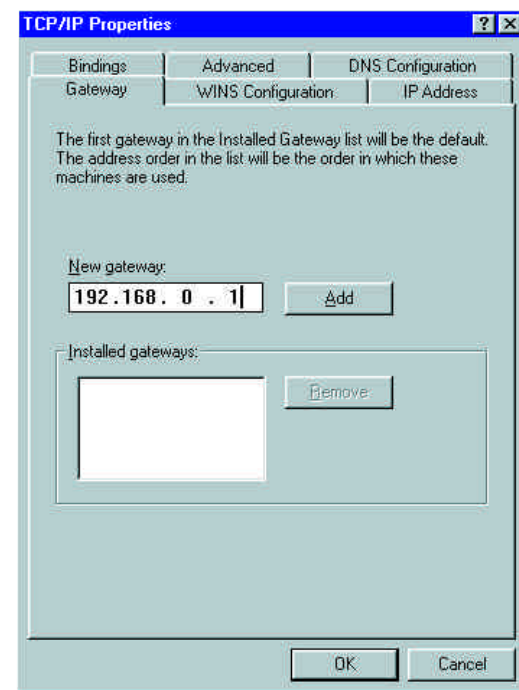
on this month's cover CD). Like IMS, SLmail95 offers a complete implementation of the Internet SMTP and POP3. With SLmail installed, your PC can function as a post office for popular internet mail clients such as FreeAgent, Pegasus, Eudora, Navigator and MS Mail/Exchange (with the Internet Mail add-on). The full-blown Windows 95 version costs \$189; the Windows NT version costs \$325. So, the software cost needn't be great either.

So we've now got our internet mail software in place but there's still one variable to determine — does your existing email account with your internet service provider permit multiple email addresses? The type of email account varies from ISP to ISP. Some, for example, allow up to 99 mailboxes from the one common-or-garden "tenner a month" account. This is certainly a cheap and cheerful solution but the principal drawback is cosmetic, the lack of a personalised email address — it would be, say, rgann@company.demon.co.uk rather than the more impressive rgann@company.co.uk. Private domains cost extra of course, and you'll have to talk to your service provider about what types of account it has on offer and proceed from there.

In terms of hardware configuration, a network email system will be similar to a normal standalone internet connection: you'll just need a phone line and a fast modem. Commissioning the connection would be much the same too. Note that as only the server accesses the internet, it will be the only machine on the network that needs to run TCP/IP. The workstations would continue to collect their email in the usual way, via NetBEUI or IPX. This makes life much easier for the network administrator and also prevents the workstations from accessing the internet during connections.

Full internet connectivity

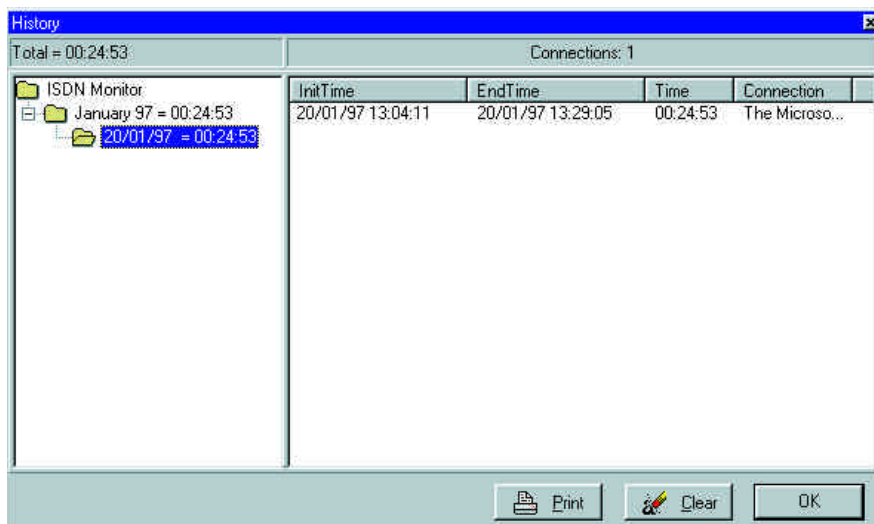
In some ways granting complete internet access to the network isn't much more complicated than setting up global email. Just two extra things are required — an IP address for each workstation (which will almost certainly require a "corporate"-style access account with your ISP) and rapid access to the internet. A permanent leased-line connection offers instant connection while a V.34 modem takes about 20 seconds to connect. The former is expensive and fast; the latter is cheap and slow. A popular compromise solution is offered by ISDN which offers the best of both worlds — a fast 64Kbps service (with the possibility of 128Kbps) with the economy of demand dialling, plus fast connections, typically just a few seconds, certainly a lot faster than the time taken by your browser to load! For occasional internet traffic, ISDN is very cost effective, offering the speed of conventional leased



The ISDN router now becomes your gateway to the internet — so don't forget to add the IP address of the router to the Gateway tab of TCP/IP properties

lines at a fraction of the cost. However, once you spend more than about four hours per day online, a leased line becomes viable.

You would use an ISDN terminal adaptor or TA to connect a single PC to an ISDN but for networks you'd fit a single ISDN router instead. This device sits anywhere on the network, watching the TCP/IP traffic that



Keeping a tight control on ISDN line charges is crucial. This little utility, ISDN Monitor, specifically monitors ISDN usage. It's on the cover disk!

passes by. It ignores traffic destined for IP addresses on the internal network but as soon as it detects a network packet aimed at an external internet address, it initiates a call to the ISP and sets up an internet connection. The line is dropped when the connection is no longer required or times out after a specified period of inactivity.

Users are spoiled for choice when it comes to ISDN routers, although you shouldn't necessarily buy the cheapest. Prices vary from about £750 to £1,500, which may sound dear but don't forget to divide the price by the number of users to get the cost into perspective. How do you go about choosing these exotic bits of kit?

ISP at your service

A good place to start is your local friendly internet service provider — what routers do they recommend or support? For example, many ISPs use Ascend routers at their end and so to simplify things they naturally recommend that you use something like an Ascend Pipeline 25 or 50 at yours. However, there are other equally good if not better alternatives, for example the £1,415 Gandalf XpressConnect LANLine 5250I or the excellent £750 Shiva AccessPort. If at all possible choose one that has an analogue phone socket (or two) — this lets you use the ISDN line as a normal phone line for fax machines or ordinary modems, for example.

Connecting an ISDN router to the network is the easy bit: you just plug the ISDN lead into the ISDN phone socket and plug in the network cable. Beware — this is usually a 10Base-T RJ45 which is the same as the ISDN (or "WAN" socket), so don't get

these two mixed up. Routers tend to be disarmingly small boxes, no larger than a modem, and so can often be tucked away in a comms cabinet or next to the server.

Configuring an ISDN router is a different matter and can be a particularly daunting task. They come with a range of tweakable settings wide enough to make any network techle jump for joy. However, if you've cut your internet teeth by manually setting up a connection using, say, Windows 95 Dial-Up Networking, you'll already be halfway up the learning curve. Even communicating with the router can be painful. Once configured, most routers let you telnet in to them for management and configuration tasks, but not usually the first time around.

Most routers therefore typically feature a serial port which lets you hook up a dumb terminal or a PC running a terminal program which lets you access the router's text-based configuration menu. One router I installed wouldn't even talk to good old Windows Terminal: I had to download ye olde Procomm Plus for DOS, circa 1987AD, before it could be configured. Luckily, some routers are a bit easier to configure — the Digi Retoura ST has an LCD control panel and keypad for direct configuration, while the latest Ascend Pipelines have Java applet-based configuration firmware, making them configurable from a browser. Most user-friendly of all is probably the Windows-based Shiva Monitor software supplied with the AccessPort.

Once connected to your router you'll need to enter such crucial details as the ISDN number it has to dial, the IP address of the router or gateway at the other end,

the IP address of this router, the DNS IP address, logins, passwords and security levels. This is just a basic list of data you can enter; more sophisticated users will want to configure things like the PAP and CHAP security protocols, data compression and bandwidth on demand.

Checking that the installation works is fairly straightforward and most include comprehensive diagnostics in the firmware as standard. Once the installation has passed this test you can use conventional internet tools, such as ping or even a web browser, to make sure that calls are being initiated and terminated as required.

The final step is to roll out TCP/IP to the workstations, a relatively easy task if you're using Windows 95, less so if you're still using Windows 3.1x. Your internet service provider will have allocated you a range of IP addresses, say 192.168.0.1 to 192.168.0.25, and you then manually dole out one of these IP addresses to each workstation. This tedious chore can be greatly simplified if you're running Windows NT on the server, as you can install the DHCP (Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol) service. This lets you define a pool of IP addresses that are then dynamically allocated to each workstation as they log on to the network. So instead of specifying a "static" IP address for each workstation, you'd obtain the IP address automatically from the server.

Silence is expensive

A final word of warning: ISDN is completely different to the usual PSTN phone system we hook our modem up to, and it's easy to rack up excessive ISDN phone bills unless you keep a close eye on it. The main problem is ISDN's inscrutable "silence": the absence of the usual audible clues such as dial tones and negotiation whistles and noise means you're entirely dependent on software to tell you if the line is up and data is flowing correctly, which is a scary prospect. If you don't want phone bills that resemble telephone numbers (ho-ho, weak joke) it's essential to get BT to supply you with completely itemised bills for your ISDN line so you can see exactly what your router gets up to when you're not looking.

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