

Dead Trees

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COMMUNICATIONS

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Virtual phones for a virtual office

My office is in my home, but I spend a fair amount of time not there. When I am there, I'm sometimes talking on the business line. An answering machine might be adequate for taking calls while I'm away from the phone, but I don't like callers to get a busy signal when they call.

I like "call waiting" even less. It annoys the person you're talking to and doesn't exactly enhance the image of professionalism. Ameritech, like most of local phone companies, offers its own central office answering system, but the only notification method available is via an Ameritech pager. I have a cell phone, so why do I need a pager.

Then I found eVoice, a service that could monitor my phone, answer the phone if I was on the line or not home, and then notify me by e-mail that I had a message. I could pick up the message on-line or via a toll-free number. Unfortunately, eVoice died in July.

On the recommendation of eVoice, I looked at Internet Call Manager. At first, it appeared that this was just a service that would answer my phone when I was on a dial-up Internet connection. Since I have a cable modem, that didn't appeal to me. But further investigation turned up (as Paul Harvey would say) the rest of the story.

Internet Call Manager (ICM) can answer my phone when the phone is busy. It can also answer the phone when I'm not in my home office. If I'm working at any other location where I'm on-line, a small pop-up box tells me that someone is calling. I then have the option of directing the call to another number, playing a specific message, sending the call to voice mail, or just allowing it to go to voice mail. When a call goes to voice mail, I can listen to it via my browser or call a toll-free number to pick up the message.

ICM can even send a message to a pager or cell phone. If there's a shortcoming, it's the ICM incoming message limitation: Callers can leave a message of any length as long as it's no more than 60 seconds long. I've added a reminder to my voice mail message, but that 60-second limitation is unfortunate if someone needs to leave a complex message for me. So far, the advantages outweigh that disadvantage.

Getting connected

Ameritech didn't make the process of getting ICM set up easy, though. It took several tries to find somebody at Ameritech who could wrap his mind around what I wanted to do and why. When I'd signed up for the eVoice service, eVoice took care of telling Ameritech what to do and how. But when eVoice notified me that it was closing, I had to contact Ameritech. Ameritech thought I had their answering service, then figured out that I had

eVoice's service. But they couldn't change anything because the original order had been placed by eVoice. All I could do was wait for eVoice to stop answering. Then Ameritech could do something.

I'm happy the fire department doesn't work this way:

"Fire department."

"I have a fire in my basement!"

"How big is the fire?"

"It's just a little one."

"Well, call us back when it's out of control and we'll send someone over."

Eventually eVoice stopped answering my phone and I called Ameritech again. The person I spoke with was more interested in learning about how much I was paying for my cable modem than in setting up the connections to ICM.

When I tested ICM a few days later (Ameritech requires 2 or 3 days to make the change, which involves a few dozen keystrokes at a computer keyboard), I found that it worked only if the line was busy. Otherwise, the phone just rang. And rang. And rang.

ICM's unhelpful help

ICM is a small Canadian company that reportedly has been taken over by AOL. That may explain what happened next. I sent ICM an e-mail asking for help. Several days later, I sent another e-mail asking for help. A day after that, another e-mail. And then I noticed an option for an on-line "chat" with support. I selected that.

Ten minutes later, I had the answer: I had to tell Ameritech that I wanted "Call Forward Busy Don't Answer".

When I called Ameritech, I pronounced the magic words with care and the level 1 technician said, "Oh. I can't do that. Let me connect you to the central office." At the central office, I talked to Ryan. Ryan checked my account records. "This was set up wrong," he said. "You need busy line transfer (EVB) and alternate answer (EVD). You have only EVB." A few key-clicks later, he said, "I've set up alternate answer for you. It will start working tomorrow."

What the heck is this?

Dead Trees is the William Blinn Communications newsletter. It's published whenever I feel like it, although I generally feel like it when I'm preparing the month's invoices. If you didn't receive an invoice with this newsletter, kindly contact me and we'll rectify that situation. Please note that despite the name, of the publication, I bear no particular animosity toward trees. The name is simply an acknowledgment that paper is made from, well, dead trees.

If I ever need anything from Ameritech again, I hope I can find Ryan. He may be the only person in the company who knows how things work.

ICM is working

ICM looks like a winner. This is exactly the service you need if you spend a lot of time online with a dial-up connection and you don't have a second line, or if you want something better than an answering machine or the telephone company's voice mail.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the service is that the cost is just \$6 per month. (You'll probably want an extra feature for another \$3 per month, but less than \$10 per month is a reasonable price for the functionality and the flexibility ICM offers.

For more information, point your browser here: <http://www.internetcallmanager.com/>. 

Happy birthday PC?

On August 13, 1981, IBM announced the IBM 5150 PC Personal Computer. For this reason, a lot of people think that we've just celebrated the 20th anniversary of the personal computer.

Not quite.

What IBM did was publish the specifications for the basic input-output system (BIOS) and use off-the-shelf components that anyone could buy. These decisions instantly created the "compatible" and "clone" systems that continue to exist today. There are many who say that if Apple had followed this route, Apple would today have 80% of the market and "Wintel" machines would have 10 to 20%.

But that wasn't when the personal computer was born.

Some folks trace the PC's history to May 1966, when Steven Gray founded the Amateur Computer Society and began publishing the ACS Newsletter. That would make the PC 35, not just 20.

In 1968 Douglas Engelbart of the Stanford Research Institute demonstrated a keyboard, keypad, mouse, and windows at the Joint Computer Conference in San Francisco's Civic Center. Yes, the mouse and a windows-like environment is that old. He also showed a word processor, a hypertext system, and a system that allowed him to work with remote colleagues. Computers were still too large and too expensive to be "personal", but the path was clear.

In 1972, the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) started work on a true personal computer that would fit under a desk. This became the "Alto", a computer that was never used outside the lab.

I trace the advent of the personal computer to December 1974. Popular Electronics (for the January 1975 issue) used a picture of the MITS Altair 8800 computer kit on the cover. Actually, the cover photo was a prototype because the actual kits weren't available in time. The \$439 Altair kit used an Intel 8080 processor. I really wanted one!

In March 1976, Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs completed a computer circuit board and produced the Apple I computer. The Apple Computer Company was incorporated on April Fool's Day.


In 1977, Apple Computer introduced the Apple II with a Motorola 6502 CPU, 4KB RAM, 16KB ROM, keyboard, 8-slot motherboard, game paddles, a color graphics/text monitor, and built-in BASIC. The first personal computer with color graphics sold for \$1300.

In August, Radio Shack joined the fray with its TRS-80. The computer featured a Zilog Z80 CPU, 4KB RAM, 4KB ROM, keyboard, black-and-white video display, and tape cassette. It sold for just \$600 – less than half the cost of the Apple.

In June 1978 Intel released the 4.77MHz 8086 microprocessor. It featured 16-bit registers, a 16-bit data bus, and 29,000 transistors. Spacing was now 3 microns. The CPU was available for \$360. (*Current spacing is around 0.18 microns and dropping!*)

The 4th West Coast Computer Faire in May 1979 brought a demonstration of VisiCalc by Software Arts and the first "killer app" was born. Dan Bricklin and Bob Frankston wrote it.

Between 1979 and 1981, Texas Instruments, Motorola, Commodore, Atari, and others developed computers or technologies that advanced computers. In 1980, Seagate developed the first 5¼-inch fixed disk drive – 5MB for \$600.

Fast-forward to 1981: IBM announced the *IBM 5150 PC Personal Computer* – not at a West Coast Computer Faire, but in New York City. The PC featured Intel's 4.77 MHz 8088 CPU, 64KB RAM (expandable to 256 KB), 40KB ROM, one 5.25-inch floppy drive (160 KB capacity), and PC-DOS 1.0 (Microsoft's MS-DOS). The price: about \$3000. Microsoft BASIC was included. So was VisiCalc, UCSD Pascal, CP/M-86, and Easywriter 1.0. Users could add color graphics and max the memory for about \$6000. 

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Intel returns to the lead

Intel fell behind in the speed struggle with AMD last year, then released a faster chip that was so badly flawed that it had to be recalled. Now Intel is back in the lead for a while with its Pentium 4 chip.

The new Pentium 4 runs at 2 GHz, but Intel demonstrated a chip that runs at 3.5 GHz. Intel also claims to increase performance by nearly a third with a new technology called "hyper-threading". The technology has been in development for more than 4 years and will be used initially in CPUs for servers.

Intel is also working on a new chip for portable computers. It's being developed by a team in Israel. The new chip sounds like a challenge to Transmeta's Crusoe chip. The new mobile CPU is scheduled to be available in the first half of 2003.

And don't count AMD out. In January I picked an AMD Athlon CPU for the PC I built because it equaled Intel in speed and was significantly less expensive. AMD used to be known as the *value* CPU manufacturer, but the company's latest chips have matched or exceeded Intel's. Transmeta's chip further confuses the market because it's a better choice for some applications. 

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