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Getting Online

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Whether your motivation is communicating with your clients, selling your services, or detailing demand, you'll need to find a way to connect to the Net. There's no shortage of companies that are vying to sell you your ticket to the online marketplace—but there are several ways to avoid paying the toll.

To get online you basically need two things—a device that can support a Web browser, usually a PC, from which to navigate, and an Internet service provider (ISP), which you call for connection to the Internet. In the Net's early days, ISPs were thought to hold the keys to the kingdom, but now the role of Net access, and indeed the boxes they connect, have willingly been sacrificed in the name of customer acquisition.

MAKING A SUCCESS OF ACCESS

In spite of their allure, most free PC offers are not worth it. A typical ISP costs about \$20 per month and lets you access the Internet at up to 56 kilobits per second (Kbps), but faster connections are on the way, and we've yet to see a free PC that has a guaranteed upgrade to a broadband connection like those offered by ADSL and cable modems.

Why is this important? First, in addition to being many times faster than dial-up modems, both ADSL and cable modems offer persistent connections. You don't have to dial up, so there are no busy signals or disconnections. The Net is always waiting for you, like electricity. If you've experienced Internet access at a large corporation or college, you have some idea of how accessing the Internet with these technologies feels. If you'd only experienced the Net this way, the dial-up experience would seem broken. It's taking large phone and cable companies years to roll out these

technologies, but they should be available throughout much of their service areas by the end of 2001, two years before most of the three-year service plans typical of free-PC offers expire, assuming you signed at the beginning of 2001.

Second, if you think you're saving \$2,000 for the cost of a new PC, you haven't been shopping for a PC for a while. At the time of this writing, \$2,000 bought you a nearly top-of-the-line 866 MHz Pentium III, with 128 MB of RAM, a 40 GB hard disk, DVD player, 3D acceleration, and a 17" monitor from Dell—in short, a PC that could eat most free PCs as a light snack. The subsidized PCs that many companies are offering would sell for closer to \$600. One particular weak spot is the hard disk, which at 6 GB and under is barely big enough to load Microsoft Office and a couple of games. Remember that virtually all of the value of these PCs to the companies that supply them depend on your going online, so the PC has been built with that in mind.

Finally, the “standard” ISP rate of \$20 per month is increasingly starting to crumble in places. Several national players offer Internet access for \$15 per month or lower. And after several false starts, it seems that free, ad-supported ISPs are starting to gain momentum in the United States. The next section discusses free ISP options for existing PC owners.

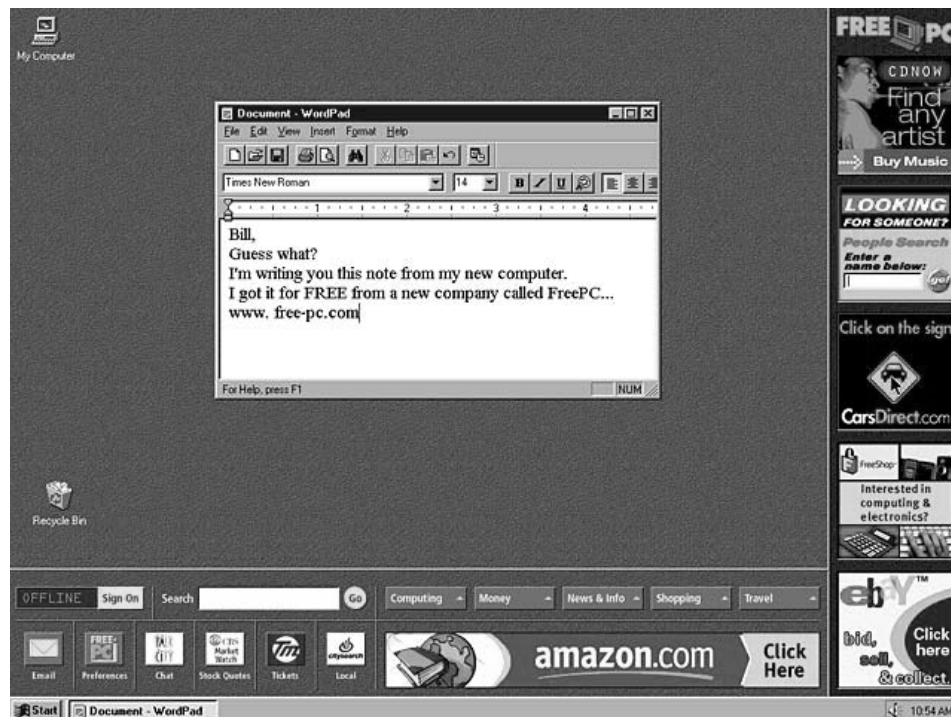
HARD LESSONS IN HARDWARE

The free PC craze began to sweep the industry in 1999. However, the promise was a little ahead of the reality. Indeed, “free PCs” were so scarce that Gateway, which had survived its share of computing fads, ran a television commercial that likens them to other myths, like the Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot. The free PC is typically exchanged for one or more of the following:

- permission to target ads at you
- a commitment to join the company's ISP or its partner ISP
- signing up for a credit card, bank account, or buyers' club

The only one that was truly “free” in terms of monetary exchange was Scenario 1. Free-PC was launched in 1998 with the idea of giving away computers (with free Internet access) in exchange for filling part of the hard disk and screen with advertising (see Figure 1.1).

Shortly after Free-PC's announcement, a group of companies began offering “free” PCs with the stipulation that consumers sign contracts for Internet access for several years. Taking this almost lease-based approach, other inexpensive PC makers quickly followed suit by partnering with or becoming ISPs, and finally some of the

**Figure 1.1**

Free-PC offered consumers a sub-\$1,000 Compaq PC plus Internet access in exchange for constantly downloading and viewing advertising that displayed in a strip on the right side of the screen.

more established companies did the same. Table 1.1 summarizes some options available to you if you're willing to lock in your Internet service for some time to come.

All the companies have more powerful PCs available, and some let you buy the PC and Internet access in advance. Be wary that other companies that have tried giving away computers in exchange for Internet access have fallen by the wayside. Microworkz, which had hawked low-cost PCs in addition to a low-cost device connected to your television, called the iToaster, eventually became toast itself. And Enchilada, which offered a high-end version called "The Grand Enchilada," went south—and not just south of the border. Furthermore, even the survivors listed in Table 1.1 are sometimes sporadic in accepting online orders. Table 1.1, at this writing, lends credence to Gateway's television commercials.

Having your PC provider go broke, though, may not be as bad as it sounds. After failing to attract enough advertising dollars, Free-PC was ultimately bought in early 2000 by E-Machines. The lucky few who received its computers were allowed to keep them and were given instructions for removing the advertising.

Table 1.1 Comparing Free PCs with Long-term Internet Access Contracts

Company	PC offered*	Monthly fee*	Contract length	notes
DirectWeb http://www.directweb.com/	450 MHz AMD-K6-2, 64 MB RAM 4 GB hard drive	\$24.95	3 years	PC is IBM Aptiva. Shipping and processing fees are extra.
Gobi http://www.gobi.com/	366 MHz Celeron 32 MB RAM 4.3 GB hard drive	\$25.99	3 years	\$60 shipping and \$30 processing fees. \$50 to keep computer at end of term.
InterSquid http://www.intersquid.com/	333 MHz processor 32 MB RAM 4.3 GB hard drive	\$29.99	30 months	\$60 shipping and \$40 processing fees.

*Minimum configuration available as of October 2000

ISPs have also tried partnering directly with major retail chains to provide more flexibility in your purchase, especially if you already have a PC. In exchange for a multiyear agreement with CompuServe, Circuit City has offered \$400 off anything in the store. Office supply chain Staples has offered similar deals.

FREE PCS AND MORE

At least two companies have tried interesting twists on the “PC for Internet access.” While one will appeal more toward individuals, another is definitely skewed more toward small businesses.

PeoplePC

PeoplePC has a range of leasing rates for snaring your next PC, depending on which computer package you choose—or you can choose to prepay in one fell swoop. At the lower end, an Intel Celeron 667 MHz desktop system will set you back \$24.95 a

month for 36 months. An Intel Celeron 700 MHz desktop system is \$29.95 a month for 36 months, while a Pentium III 733 MHz laptop costs \$39.95 for 36 months. Furthermore, the company has committed to on-site support for the three years of the contract, a nice touch that companies such as Dell typically charge for after the first year.

PeoplePC hopes to leverage its network of “members” to command discounts from vendors, who will in turn deliver special perks to PeoplePC owners. For example, PeoplePC comes with a \$100 credit from online broker E*Trade, \$20 off every purchase of \$50 or more at Art.com, and 5 percent off all purchases at AtYourOffice.com. Using straight math, it’s hard to see the PeoplePC proposition making sense, but if you’re going to hitch your wagon to one of these schemes, you may as well milk it for the perks.

PeoplePC has also struck some major deals with some of the nation’s top employers recently, such as Ford Motor Company and Delta Airlines. These deals provide free computers to employees in exchange for heavily subsidized Internet access. The days of the company town may be back in the global village.

URL: <http://www.peoplepc.com/>

Contact: info@peoplepc.com

Everdream

If PeoplePC has made support a differentiator, Everdream and competitor Center-Beam have made it their focus. Designed specifically for small businesses, Everdream calls its plan “subscription computing.” For a monthly fee, the company supplies Pentium PCs and Internet access through Concentric Networks, but under its own ISP. It offers both dial-up and high-speed ADSL access.

Everdream claims it can support the hardware better because it retains control of the configuration. With a simple remote command, Everdream’s technical support team can restore the PC’s configuration to its original pristine state. Don’t worry about losing your files, though; they’re backed up and encrypted on the company’s servers. Everdream’s service starts at \$150 per month per PC for dial-up access. Discounts apply as you add PCs. In addition to Microsoft Office, Everdream supplies ACT!, a program popular with salespeople. Through a partnership with Netopia, Everdream precodes its customers’ PCs with a template that will enable them to create a Web site to publicize their business. Customers can then work through Everdream to add increased functionality to their online stores as their business needs grow.

URL: <http://www.everdream.com/>

Contact: info@everdream.com

CenterBeam

Through an alliance with Microsoft, CenterBeam lives slightly more on the cutting edge than rhyming competitor Everdream. It supports laptops and wireless networking technology from Lucent. CenterBeam's service starts at \$165 per month. The key components of CenterBeam's technology service include a wireless LAN solution, Dell PCs and servers, Microsoft Windows and Office 2000, Hewlett-Packard printers, high-speed Internet connectivity, daily data backup and recovery, comprehensive security, hardware and software upgrades, and dedicated customer support.

Paying \$150 per month and up may seem like a huge premium above more consumer-focused efforts such as PeoplePC, but both Everdream and CenterBeam have invested heavily in their remote diagnostics. These should provide a level of support beyond what consumer-focused players can offer. The fixed fee also alleviates customers' concerns about unexpected downtime, repair costs, changes in personnel, and upgrades.

Also, they must contend with networked environments, which are significantly more complex than standalone PCs. Both companies promise round-the-clock live support and remote diagnostics. Both also realize they may have to contend with existing PCs when they install their workstations. CenterBeam has developed a buy-back program for a small business's existing PCs.

URL: <http://www.centerbeam.com/>

Contact: info@centerbeam.com

NadaPC

The founder of NadaPC started out trying to offer something else for free that was "not a PC" in a strict sense. FreeMac.com sought to give away one million iMacs, but the initiative collapsed. Now the company is trying to recover from the cold shoulder with the Icebox.

The device, manufactured by Samsung, looks like a later generation of the Macintosh Color Classic (see Figure 1.2). It integrates many features not found in competitive standalone Internet appliances, like Netpliance's iOpener and Compaq's Home Internet Appliance, that rely on the MSN Internet service provider. The Icebox includes a CD with stereo sound and a DVD player, and the device itself is free when you pay for its Internet service. Most notably, the device's 9-inch screen doubles as a television. It comes with a remote control and wireless keyboard, which can both be washed clean. In fact, it seems that NadaPC threw in everything but the sink in the kitchen, which seems to be the room for which it was made.

**Figure 1.2**

NadaPC's Icebox, an appliance manufactured by Samsung, doubles as a TV and DVD player. It's free when you sign up for 36 months of NadaPC's Internet service.

NadaPC charges \$21.95 for its ISP service for a minimum of 36 months and requires that you open a bank account with its partner bank. You can also purchase it up front for \$689; while the device may work with other ISPs, there's no guarantee it will. There's also a nonrefundable shipping and handling fee of \$59.99.

It remains to be seen how robust Internet surfing will be in the Icebox, but its hardware indicates a unique convergence device that compares favorably with other access-bundled Internet appliances. If what you really want is just a small, integrated DVD player, though, Chinese manufacturer Konka makes one built into a 13-inch television for about half the price.

URL: <http://www.nadapc.com/>

Contact: <http://www.nadapc.com/custservice.html>

FreePCTV

If you'd like to recommend something to your less savvy customers, or would like to just have a home page on one of the hosting services listed in later chapters, FreePCTV may be your answer. It also may be handy to have around for checking out how your commerce Web site looks like on the tube.

Like its far better known cousin, WebTV, FreePCTV allows you to use your television and a phone line to access the Net. In addition to free Web access, it supports up to six e-mail accounts. It also comes with a remote control and a wireless keyboard that often costs extra on WebTV models. FreePCTV is even smaller than the original WebTV box (but not Sony's latest WebTV Classic), much less the larger WebTV Plus units from Philips and Mitsubishi that have fancy VCR control and electronic programming guides. That said, FreePCTV's operation is not quite as elegant, and the interface is very "inspired" by WebTV's (see Figure 1.3).

FreePCTV is offered by PowerChannel, Inc. Like the old Free-PC, you have to apply for the device, so there is no guarantee you'll be able to get one. Unlike Free-PC, FreePCTV doesn't take up a lot of your screen real estate with ads. This is especially fortunate, as TV screens display far less than most computer screens, even though in general they are much larger (go figure). You will, however, have to fill out

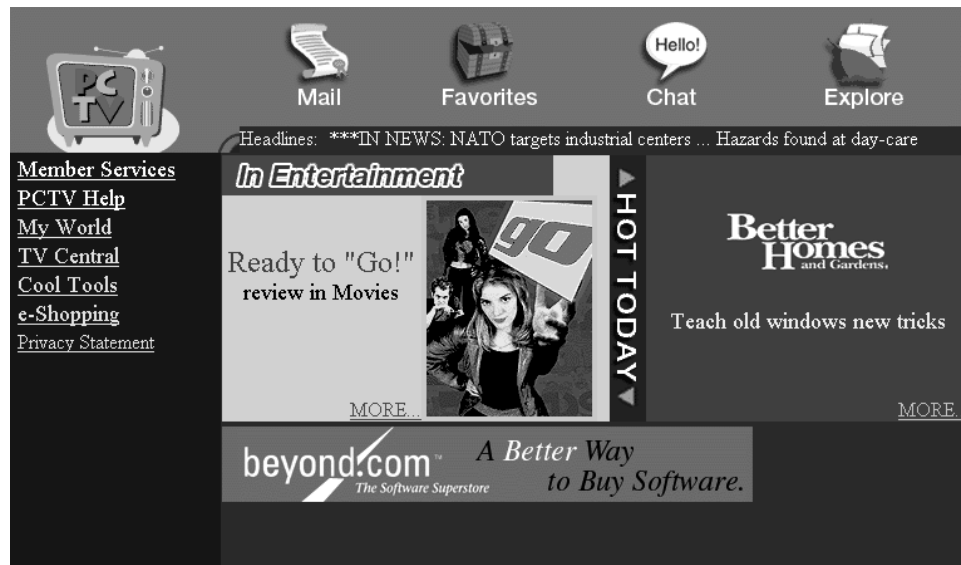


Figure 1.3

FreePCTV is a free Internet service accessed through any TV set.

a monthly online survey of your buying habits and product preferences that takes about ten minutes to complete.

URL: <http://www.freepctv.net/>

Contact: info@powerchannel.net

FREE ISPS

The basic free ISP proposition is that in exchange for Internet access, you agree to watch online advertising. However, unlike advertisements on a Web site, which disappear when you leave the site, free ISPs typically install a banner on your screen that remains active as long as you have your connection open. This banner “floats” atop all other windows and can’t be hidden. To do this, they need to install software on your computer, which typically includes a dialing program. Because of this, you may not be able to access your free ISP account if you are working on a PC that doesn’t have the software installed.

Table 1.2 provides a comparison of the free ISPs discussed in this section.

NetZero

NetZero has over seven million registered users, although it’s unknown how many of them use it as a primary access vehicle. Its chunk of online real estate, dubbed the ZeroPort (see Figure 1.4), is indicative of two major trends in free ISP access, providing utility and transaction capability in what was previously a window that served only ads. The ZeroPort may be docked to either the top or bottom of your screen. Your personalized My Z Start page includes news, sports, stocks, financial services, and weather. Since NetZero is also the ISP and provides free e-mail accounts, it can alert you when you have new e-mail. The NetZero Free service includes 40 hours of free Internet service per month. Fee-based programs—referred to in these pages as “big spender” services—include the \$9.95-per-month NZ Platinum service (which removes banner ads) and the NetZero Professional Extended Access Pass, in which you pay \$9.95 for unlimited access for the remainder of the month.

The first time you connect to NetZero, you’ll receive a brief tour of NetZero’s features as you’re connecting. It includes a ticker that can be extensively customized—including one of the most innovative interfaces for selecting company stocks to track—or turned off entirely. Underneath and to the right of the banner ads are buttons. Most take you directly to Web sites, although some branch out into a menu of buttons.

URL: <http://www.netzero.net/>

Contact: instantanswers@netzero.net

Table 1.2 Comparing Free ISPs

Company	Speed	Availability	POP e-mail?	Advertising
NetZero	53.3 Kbps.	Across the U.S. and Canada. 40 hours of free usage per month.	Yes	Configurable 800×88-pixel banner, dubbed the ZeroPort. Your surfing patterns are tracked.
FreeLane	Up to 56K.	Across the U.S.	Free Web-based e-mail accounts only—no POP accounts.	Persistent 800×60-pixel banner can be anchored to your Windows Start menu.
Juno	Up to 56K. You're asked to choose three access numbers: One to log on, one for the Web, and a third for e-mail. E-mail access requires a separate logon. During e-mail logon, a dialog box sits atop all your applications.	Across the U.S.	Yes, using Juno's e-mail software. You can also have your own free 12 MB Web site.	This movable 632×81-pixel banner bar cannot be anchored to the top or bottom of your screen.
Winfire	14.4 Kbps (higher for premium plans).	Service is available in selected U.S. cities, including Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, and Los Angeles/Orange County.	Web-based e-mail account.	Banner ads appear on the Winfire toolbar (which do not appear for premium Winfire plans). If you terminate service in less than 13 months, Winfire charges a \$200 cancellation fee. Winfire may also add promotional messages to your e-mails.



Figure 1.4

The ZeroPort viewbar, ever-present for users of NetZero's free Internet service, may be docked at the top or bottom of your screen.

FreeLane

To use Excite's FreeLane free Internet service, you'll need to download and install its Windows-only software. You'll then be able to take advantage of unlimited 56K Web access across most of the U.S. The service also provides access to free e-mail, online communities, and voice chat (see Figure 1.5). FreeLane's requests for personal information—from hobbies and interests to the name of your current long-distance carrier—are more intrusive than the other free Internet service providers in this roundup.

FreeLane's obligatory advertising banner bar measures 800x60 pixels and can be docked to your Windows start menu. FreeLane also offers 60 free voice mail messages and 10 free faxes a month.

**Excite Inbox**

You now enjoy a FREE email, voicemail and fax account, accessible from any computer with Internet access. Let everyone know your new email address with 100 free business cards courtesy of Excite. [Create your cards now.](#)

**Excite Planner**

More than a personal calendar, Excite Planner provides free access to Web-based versions of your contact lists, appointments, notes, and tasks, plus full integration and synchronization with personal information managers.

**Excite Clubs**

Create your own place on the Web and invite anyone you like to share photos, files, a calendar and fun information. We offer FREE photo scanning with Seattle Filmworks.

**Excite Chat**

Make friends and find people who share your interests. Join over 14,000 simultaneous chatters talking about everything from the hottest celebrity gossip to how to play the stock market.

**Excite Message Boards**

Exchange ideas on any subject you can think of. Share jokes, stories and advice with people from around the world.

**Excite Member Directory**

Find old and new friends on Excite. Update your personal profile, and share it with others. Your profile is at: <http://members.excite.com/directory/emullin>

Download Freelane 2.0 Now

Figure 1.5

At registration, FreeLane shows you the Excite community portal services of which you can take advantage.

The site includes straightforward, step-by-step installation instructions. If you have already registered at Excite's Web portal, you can use your Excite username and password when you begin the registration process at FreeLane.

URL: <http://freelane.excite.com/>

Contact: info@excite.com

Juno

If you can't lead 'em, beat 'em, and if you can't beat 'em, join 'em might describe the history of Juno, which began as a service that offered only free e-mail. It then offered full Web access but at full price, and then finally became the only major ISP to offer both paid and free access.

Juno retains much of the simplicity of when it was just an e-mail program, which is now integrated into the Juno Web program (Figure 1.6). Large tabs marked Read and Write allow you to see and send e-mail; the Juno program has an address book and even a spell-checker built in. Clicking Web prompts you to dial out and then offers full Web functionality. If you sign up for Juno's premium Web service, you can eliminate the banners.

URL: <http://www.juno.com/>

Contact: <http://www.juno.com/corp/contact/>

Winfire

Like the somewhat better known cable modem, DSL is about ten times faster than the average dial-up connection, but it is persistent, which means that it is always on. In theory, anyway, you never get disconnected and never have to dial up. (In reality, connections can drop off, but reconnecting typically happens in less than a second.) DSL



Figure 1.6

Juno has expanded from providing free e-mail to free Internet access.

also lets you use your existing phones and lets you talk and use the Web simultaneously. One of the problems with DSL, though, is that you must live a certain distance from a central phone switch in order to receive it at all, and the farther you are, the slower you can go.

There are some stipulations. Winfire uses a browser assistant of the same name to help you navigate the Net. It includes such features as a built-in MP3 player that lets you listen to digital music and a novel bandwidth-on-demand feature that lets you crank up the speed for tasks like downloading files. While Winfire's basic level of service is far slower than most varieties of DSL and usually requires the purchase of a \$199 DSL modem or rental for \$10 a month, many DSL providers either give away the modem or subsidize it. In addition to greater speed, the premium versions of the service remove the banner ads from the Winfire toolbar.

URL: <http://www.winfire.com/>

Contact: <http://www.winfire.com/company/contact.asp>

GOING SOFT

Now that you managed to score a PC and free Internet access (or they've managed to score you), you'll come to quickly discover that a computer without software is like a body without a soul. (Think of your least favorite politician.) Most computers include an operating system like Windows, which controls the basic functions of the computer, like launching programs and storing files, and a number of programs or applications, including those needed to create office documents, send e-mail, surf the Web, and create Web pages.

If you'd rather not shell out for those products, though, and would like to try some free alternatives or go beyond the basics, this section will clue you in on great, free software to enable your enhance your online experience.

Linux

Linux is a free operating system that runs on a variety of different types of computers, including PCs and Macs. It's similar to Unix, a very powerful operating system popular in scientific, engineering, financial, and telecom industries. Many leading Web sites run on Unix, in particular the commercial version sold by Sun Microsystems, called Solaris.

Linux is developed and distributed under a license that's called *open source*, which basically means that developers are free to enhance it as long as they share how they did it by releasing the underlying source code. There are many different distributions of Linux that package together parts of it differently or run on different processors. Linux.com lists 15 such distributions. Among the more popular commercial ones for the

PC are those from Red Hat, Slackware, Caldera (OpenLinux), and TurboLinux. For PowerPC-based Mac, there's Yellow Dog Linux, MkLinux, and LinuxPPC.

While the hardware demands for Linux are modest for a modern operating system, Linux may be one of the largest software products you can download from the Internet. According to Red Hat's Web site, it can take 27 hours to download its distribution of Linux over a modem connection so, ironically, it could take less time to order it and have it shipped by overnight courier. You can order it on CD-ROM from Red Hat; it's also included with many books on Linux, although typically those books include older versions.

If you're used to Windows or the Mac, Linux is a different beast. It is a very powerful operating system that is built by and for technical types, but it doesn't have the breadth of mainstream applications available for other operating systems. For example, Microsoft Office, Photoshop, and other Web development staples are not available for Linux. However, as more people use Linux, it is being increasingly considered for development; a version of the popular computer game *Quake* runs on Linux, and more user-friendly interfaces are being built for it. One of the friendliest to date is the KDE, or K Desktop Environment, with which most Windows or Mac users will feel pretty comfortable (see Figure 1.7).

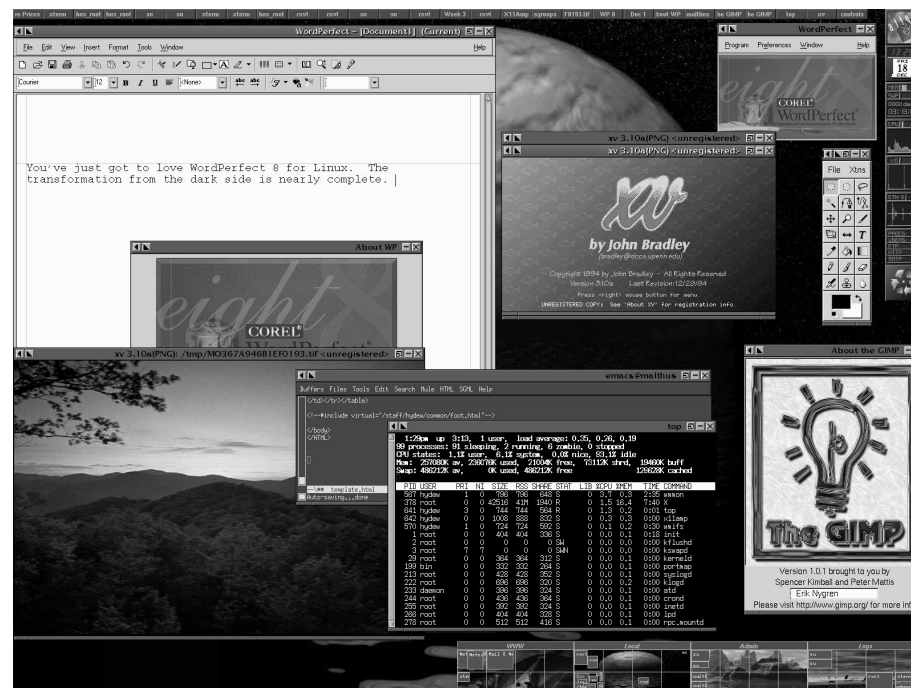


Figure 1.7

KDE is a graphical desktop interface for Linux workstations that will seem fairly familiar to Windows or Mac users.

Even with KDE, you can spend plenty of time fiddling with text files and adjusting obscure parameters to avoid glitches in Linux, but once it's running, it's very stable. Linux may not be your mainstream desktop, but it can serve other uses around your office. For example, it makes an excellent and reliable file server, or can serve as a gateway for linking multiple computers to the Internet.

Stay tuned, though. The popularity of Linux has inspired many talented developers to improve the operating system. Eazel (<http://www.eazel.com/>) is working on improving Linux's user interface and file management to make it even easier for everyday users.

URL: <http://www.linux.org/>

Contact: <http://www.linux.org/about/contact.html>

StarOffice

In 1999, Sun Microsystems purchased Star Division GmbH, which produced StarOffice, a perennial also-ran in the office suite space. Available for Linux and Windows (a Mac version is under development), StarOffice is actually a fairly complete yet compact office suite that consists of several components:

- StarOffice Writer, a word processor
- StarOffice Calc, a spreadsheet
- StarOffice Draw, a graphics program
- StarOffice Impress, a presentations program
- StarOffice Base, a database
- StarOffice Mail and Discussion, for reading e-mail and Internet news-groups
- StarOffice Chart, for creating charts and graphs
- StarOffice Schedule, a planner

StarOffice can be used for a wide variety of office productivity tasks, such as creating sales presentations (see Figure 1.8), writing business plans, creating a customer or product database, tracking expenses, and creating appointments. Note that while StarOffice is not as large as, say, Red Hat Linux, it can consume 80 MB or more of disk space before it is installed, which also makes it a product you should consider getting on CD-ROM from Sun.

URL: <http://www.sun.com/staroffice/>

Contact: <http://www.sun.com/products/staroffice/contact.html>

**Figure 1.8**

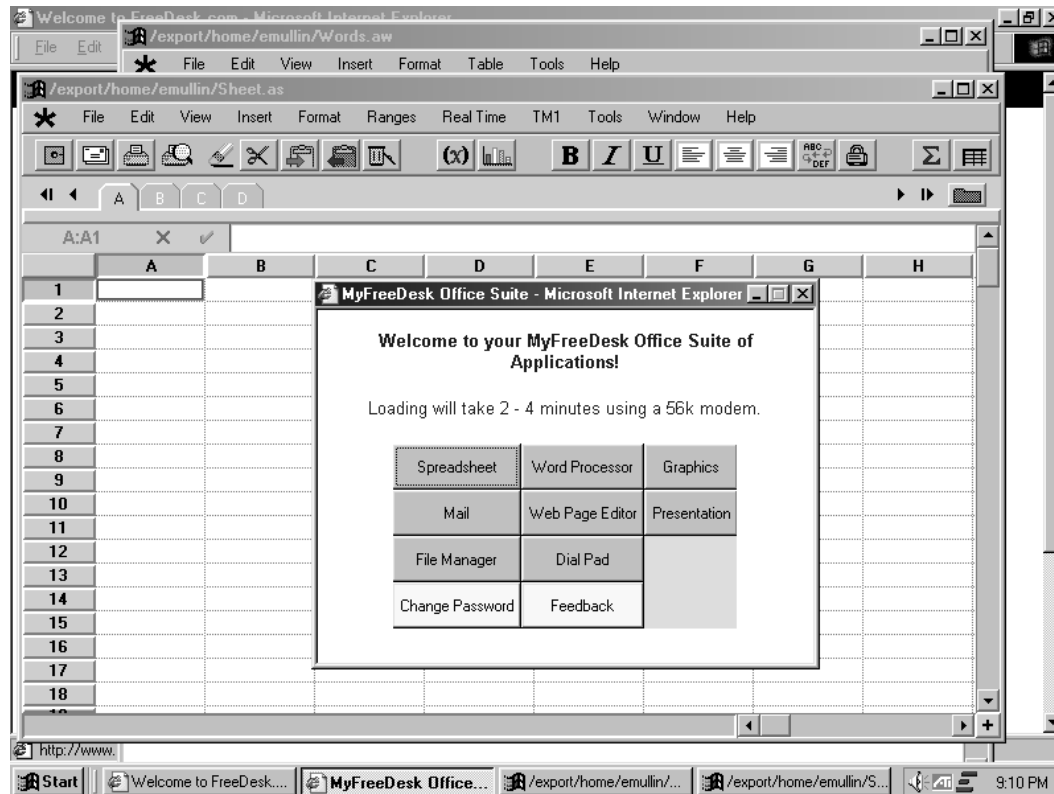
You can create presentation slides with the StarOffice Impress program.

FreeDesk

In addition to 50 MB of free storage space, FreeDesk.com provides a full-featured application suite of common PC office tools. You can access spreadsheets, graphics, or dash off text files with the Web versions of these applications. The business model calls for displaying ads that are seen at logon, though not in the applications. A future \$4.95-a-month version is intended to let users remove the ads entirely.

The site's application suite is called Applix Anyware Office, and is comprised by a word processor, an HTML authoring tool, a spreadsheet, a program for creating presentations, and a database (see Figure 1.9). Each is reminiscent of its Office 2000 counterpart, although performance is abysmally slow.

The word processor, Applix Words, even includes recordable macros, columns, tables, footnotes, borders, and outlining. Similarly, the multipage spreadsheet sports over 300 functions and charting features that will likely go unused by all but power users.

**Figure 1.9**

When you access FreeDesk.com, you can readily open multiple windows for working on Web-based versions of text files, spreadsheets, or presentations.

Your files are saved on FreeDesk.com's server in a proprietary format that unfortunately cannot be read by any other application. In order to use your document on your own local hard disk, you'll need to first export that file to Microsoft Word or WordPerfect, then use a separate file manager applet to download it. In the same vein, in order to use FreeDesk to edit a Word file on your hard disk you'd need to upload the Word document to the file manager, then run a complex Import Wizard to open it in the suite. For this reason, FreeDesk.com lends itself better to creating documents on-the-fly thanks to spontaneously bursts of energy—if you're traveling, for example, and don't have ready access to a laptop—rather than continuing to work on documents that you began editing at home or at the office.

URL: <http://www.freedesk.com/>

Contact: info@freedesk.com

FREE BROWSERS

There are many browsers available for both PCs and Macs, but the two most popular are free: Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer. While Microsoft has beat Netscape in a vicious market share battle, the two products are similar in many respects. For example, they both include shortcut features to make it easier to enter a Web address or get past a login screen with less typing.

There are three main ways to navigate around the browser. The first is by following “links” embedded on the Web page. These typically appear within text, in which case, the text is underlined. They can also appear within buttons or graphics. A browser’s Back and Forward buttons let you trace your steps, returning back to pages from which you’ve linked.

A second way is by typing Web addresses in the Address field. These are the near-ubiquitous URLs (Uniform Resource Locators) plastered over everything from shopping bags to television commercials. For example, typing <http://www.prenticehall.com/> will bring you to the publisher of this book.

A third way is by saving your favorite pages. Netscape calls these saved locations “bookmarks”; Microsoft calls them “favorites.” Selecting these links from a menu or a toolbar palette can be a great time saver. Bookmarks can be saved in folders, and both Internet Explorer and Netscape Communicator offer facilities for managing them. There are also Web sites, such as Backflip at <http://www.backflip.com/>, Blink at <http://www.blink.com/>, and HotLinks at <http://www.hotlinks.com/>, that allow you to store your bookmarks online. A program that lets you synchronize your bookmarks across multiple PCs is Bookmark Sync at <http://www.bookmarksync.com/>.

Table 1.3 compares each browser’s feature set.

Netscape Navigator

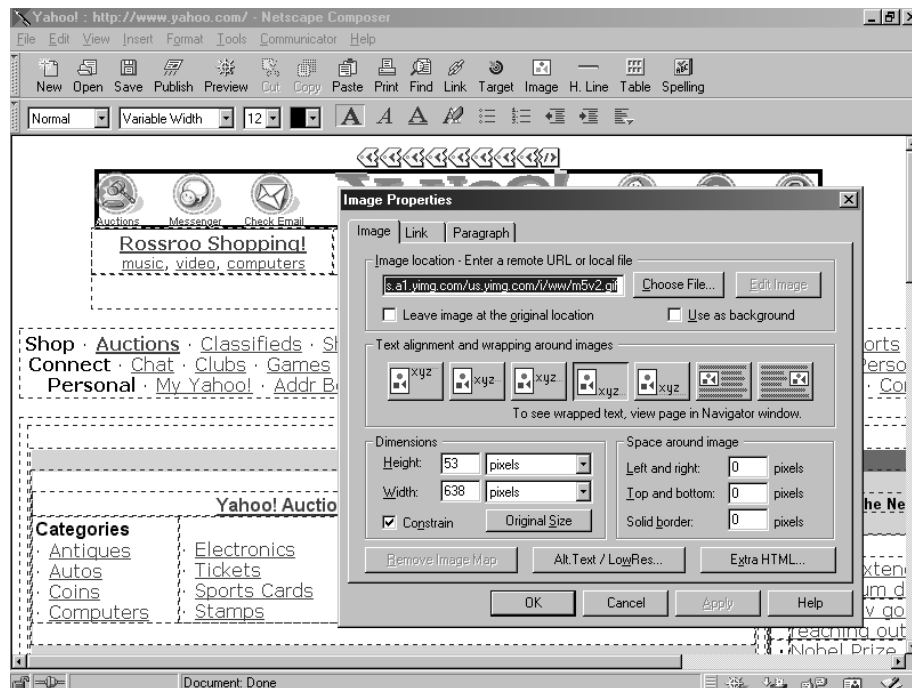
Netscape, now a subsidiary of America Online, has released Netscape 6 as a more full-featured, standards-compliant program for Web browsing, e-mail, and instant messaging (see Figure 1.10).

Netscape 6 sports a customizable left side panel known as the My Sidebar feature for conducting extensive searches and integrating a buddy list for instant messaging. You can also modify My Sidebar to view stock prices, news headlines, and any of hundreds of content tabs offered by Netscape or its content partners.

Another nifty feature is Smart Browsing, which lets you reach a Web page by typing in a single keyword instead of an entire URL. Type in *prenticehall*, for example, and your browser fills in the *www.* and *.com.* Netscape also supports multiple user profiles—so if you share your computer, each of you can maintain separate

Table 1.3 Comparison of Netscape and Microsoft Internet Explorer

Feature	Netscape 6	Microsoft Internet Explorer 5.5
System requirements	Windows 95, Windows 98, Windows 2000, or Windows NT 4.0, Pentium, 133 MHz, 64 MB of RAM. Mac OS 8.5, Mac OS 8.6, or Mac OS 9 with PowerPC, 200 MHz PowerPC 604 or G3, 64 MB RAM, with virtual memory turned on (or 48 MB dynamic RAM) or later.	16 MB RAM for Windows 95 or 98, 32 MB RAM for Windows NT, 64 MB RAM for Windows 2000; 45 MB to 111 MB hard drive space to install; 27 MB to 80 MB after restart. At press time, the most recent Mac release of Internet Explorer was IE 5.
Security features	Provides encryption option for all Web and e-mail passwords. A new menu option called Privacy and Security gives users access to managing new cookies, password and form managers, as well as the standard security manager.	Includes support for 128-bit encryption. You can use security zones to specify how you want Microsoft Internet Explorer to download applications and files from different Web sites.
Password and form management	Password and form managers simplify letting users automatically fill in forms on sites.	AutoComplete feature lets users automatically enter username and password as they begin to fill out online forms.
E-mail capabilities	Lets users define and use more than one SMTP server to send mail. Lacks the handheld sync capabilities that had previously been in Netscape Communicator.	Integrates seamlessly with Microsoft's Outlook Express.
Supports XML	Yes	No
Supports Cascading Style Sheets 1.0	Yes	Yes
Distinguishing features	Automatic translation of Web pages.	Extended DHTML capabilities through proprietary extensions.

**Figure 1.10**

Netscape 6's new Forms Manager helps you fill out and submit Web forms more quickly. Here, Netscape Composer is used to create your own Web page.

bookmarks and settings. The browser can fairly easily be customized even by new users; bookmarks can be arranged in folders via dragging and dropping. The browser includes a Quality Feedback System feature for automated incident reporting when your browser unexpectedly crashes.

Netscape has made its search feature accessible and powerful: Just enter your search term in the URL field and click Search; the Google-based search technology quickly delivers relevant results. Password Manager and Cookie Manager are two features designed to give you greater control over your privacy.

Netscape has added a novel and sophisticated translate option under its View menu. The language of the Web page you were viewing will be automatically selected for you as the source language. You can then choose the language you'd like for this Web page to be translated into; the service will remember your preferences for future translation requests. Click the button to start AutoTranslate, and in seconds the text in the browser window will appear, translated into the language you selected. If you then follow any links in the translated page, the service will translate that page

for you into the target language you chose in the setup screen. Supported languages include translating from English into Portuguese, Italian, German, Spanish, French, Japanese, Traditional Chinese, and Simplified Chinese. You can also translate to English from Portuguese, Italian, German, Spanish, French, and Japanese.

URL: <http://www.netscape.com/browsers/>

Internet Explorer

Microsoft's strategy has focused on achieving seamless integration of the PC and the Web—after all, it was Microsoft's bundling of Internet Explorer with Windows that was at the heart of the government suit against the software company. IE is flexible and readily customized either by users or developers (see Figure 1.11).

The browser is integrated with the Outlook Express mail client, FrontPage authoring tool, Microsoft Office Suite, and just about everything else Microsoft produces. It uses IntelliSense technology to help automatically complete the entering of informa-

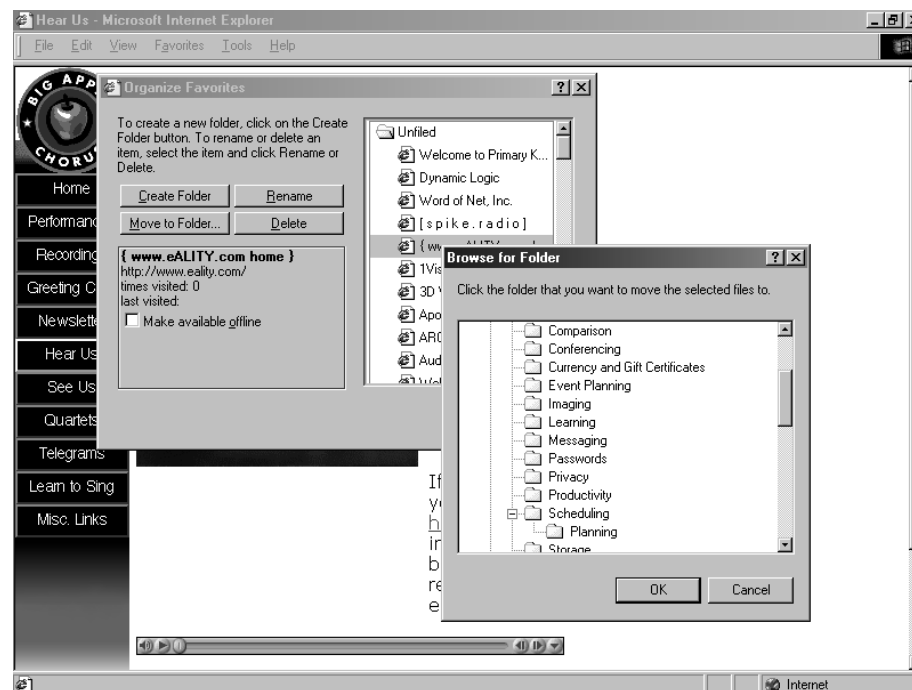


Figure 1.11

Like Netscape, Microsoft also emphasizes its browser's timesaving features. Here, the Organize Favorites feature lets you store the addresses of your favorite Web sites. (Screen shot reprinted by permission from Microsoft Corporation.)

tion on online forms and logon screens (known as AutoComplete) and automatically install Web browser components when you come to a Web page that requires them (through AutoInstall). You'll also be able to save pages for off-line viewing. The Install-On-Demand feature installs any component as required by the Web page you're visiting—so if you're browsing a Web page in Japanese, for example, Internet Explorer will download the character set you need to view the page correctly.

Microsoft has used proprietary extensions to DHTML (dynamic HTML) to add features such as colored scroll bars, color gradients, and zooming to the browsing experience. One nice new feature will probably go unnoticed by most users—there's now a print preview option, which shows how many pages are needed to print a site. Better support for Cascading Style Sheets 1 is now added, which should be seamless to end users but is a good plus for Web developers.

URL: <http://www.microsoft.com/ie>

FREE ONLINE ACCELERATORS

Most of the products and services we've discussed so far enable the basics of going online, but there are many products out there that make going online just a bit more sophisticated.

NetSonic

NetSonic is by far the most popular Internet speed accelerator. The free version is a subset of the professional version. NetSonic uses two techniques for speeding up Internet access. One is by keeping a version of frequently used Web sites on your hard disk. This can dramatically speed access, but if you're not careful, you can be viewing an older version of the site. NetSonic will let you know if you're not viewing the most recent version of a page. The second way NetSonic speeds Web access is through a technique known as "prefetching." The software will look at links where you might click next and start downloading them while you're reading the first screen. Of course, there's a good chance it will guess wrong. Prefetching is controversial because it can cause undue load on a Web server. Imagine the drain of lots of visitors sucking down huge video files that no one will actually watch.

NetSonic's benefits are worthwhile, but it is certainly not shy about reminding you of its value. Your frontmost browser window will include a short line of text in a button that takes you to one of their sponsors. NetSonic also displays a floating toolbar that shows you how much it's speeding access and allows you to turn certain features on and off. Opening NetSonic's interface will invariably pitch you the commercial version of the product, and at startup, the product will provide ads for other, typically free products.

URL: <http://www.web3000.com/>

GoZilla

If you've tried to download any of the software mentioned until now, you've noticed that downloading files can be a monstrous chore. Enter GoZilla. When you start to download a file, GoZilla springs into action, automatically checking out sites where the file is available. Once it finds them, it rates each of them in terms of how quickly they're responding. Sites that were closer, less busy, hosted on faster hardware, or that took advantage of faster connections were up to 50 percent faster than our average throughput. GoZilla can also seamlessly switch sites in the middle of a download if the site you're downloading from happens to slow down.

GoZilla includes a file manager (see Figure 1.12) for software you've downloaded, and it can schedule downloads for time that has less traffic or when you're online. It even has its own channels for popular download sites. If you have your sound set high, GoZilla's roar can be quite alarming, but generally, the software stays out of your way much better than NetSonic.

URL: <http://www.gozilla.com/>

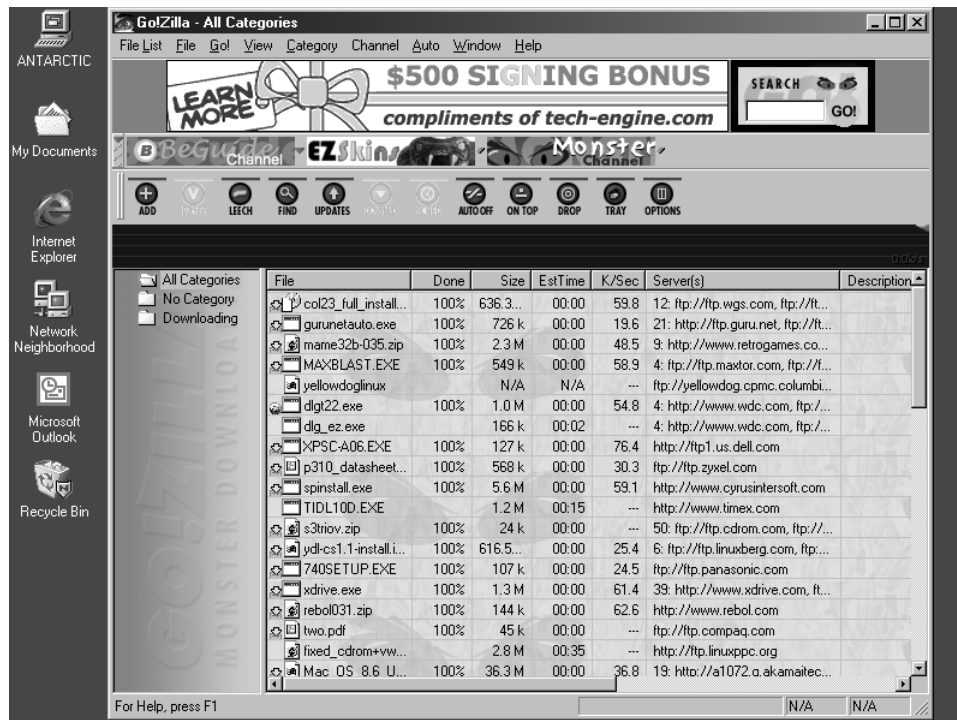


Figure 1.12

With GoZilla, you have a behind-the-scenes view of how well your file downloads are going.

Atomica

Atomica, formerly known as GuruNet, is a service for finding out more information about any given word or selected words on a Web page. After you install it, just hold down the Alt key and click on a word in your browser, and Atomica's window will display related links and other information (Figure 1.13). Best of all, Atomica appears as a taskbar icon and does not show ads.

The options intelligently change depending on what has been selected. If you click someone's name, like George Washington, Atomica will find a biography. Clicking a ticker symbol like IBM will display company news and a stock quote. Clicking a city name like Seattle will provide geography information and weather. Many words and names will bring up encyclopedia entries, definitions, or an option

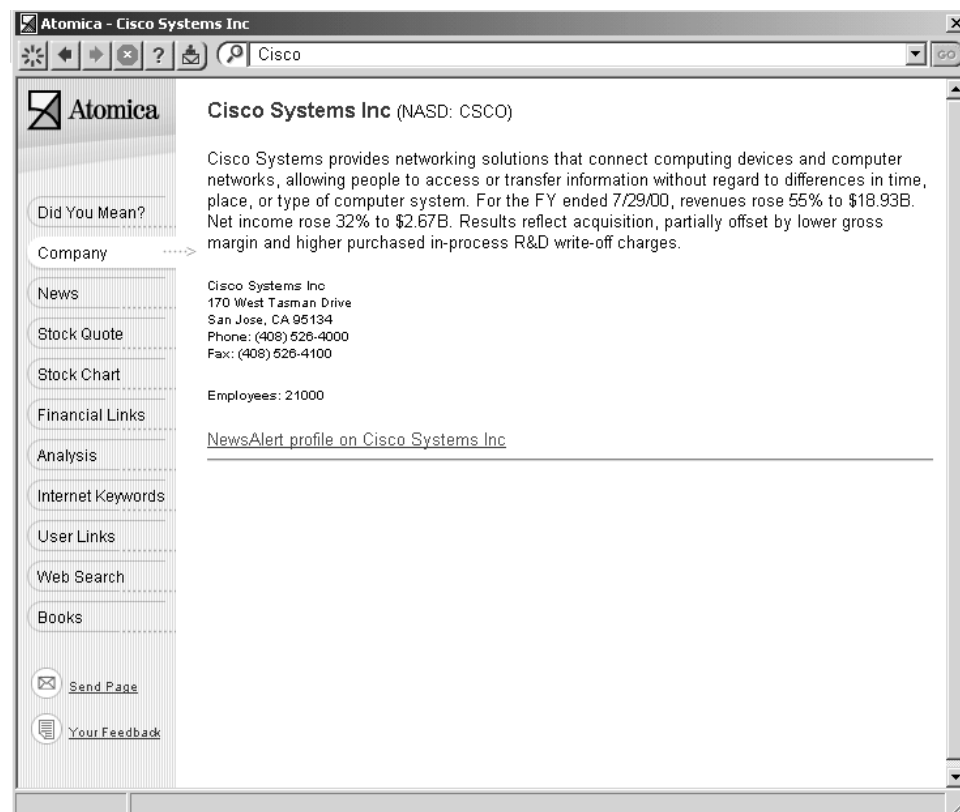


Figure 1.13

By involving the Atomica pop-up window, shown here, you can access reference information about any term or proper name on a Web page without leaving that site.

to translate English words into other languages. While Atomica requires you click on only one word at a time, you can type phrases into a search window in the box. The system tray icon allows you to choose different preferences, such as what combination of keys will call up Atomica.

URL: <http://www.atomica.com/>

FREE INFORMATION ASSISTANTS

As programs such as Outlook Express and NetMeeting have shown, there's more to getting on the Net beyond the browser. Apart from a proclivity for exotic names, such as Odigo, Obongo, and Zadu, they are all available only for Windows. They're described here in three categories, although some have feature sets that would place them in multiple groups.

Information accessories are typically thin strips (see Figure 1.14) that float on your screen, similar to the ones that are provided by some free ISPs. They typically



Figure 1.14

By clicking a button on Alexa's toolbar, you can find information related to the topic on the Web page you're reading.

provide tickers on news, stocks, and sports, and integrate with “wallets”—software that lets you purchase items online without having to fill in your credit card information every time.

Some examples are

- Alexa (<http://www.alexa.com/>)
- Desktop News (<http://www.desktopnews.com/>)
- Infogate (<http://www.infogate.com/>)
- Iware (<http://www.iwareinc.com/>)

Communication accessories typically provide a forum to comment on or to communicate with other Web site visitors about content on the Web page being viewed (see Figure 1.15). In general, they are only as good as the number of people using them.



Figure 1.15

Odigo is a free tool for instant messaging and online chats.

Some examples are

- Cahoots (<http://www.cahoots.com/>)
- MessageVine (<http://www.messagevine.com/>)
- Odigo (<http://www.odigo.com/>)
- Third Voice (<http://www.thirdvoice.com/>)
- uTOK (<http://www.utok.com/>)
- Zadu (<http://www.zadu.com/>)

Finally, form accessories remember your user IDs and passwords, streamlining the process of logging in to countless sites (see Figure 1.16). Like information accessories, they are often integrated with or serve as wallets.

Some examples are

- Gator (<http://www.gator.com/>)
- v-Go (<http://www.passlogix.com/>)
- Obongo (<http://www.obongo.com/>)

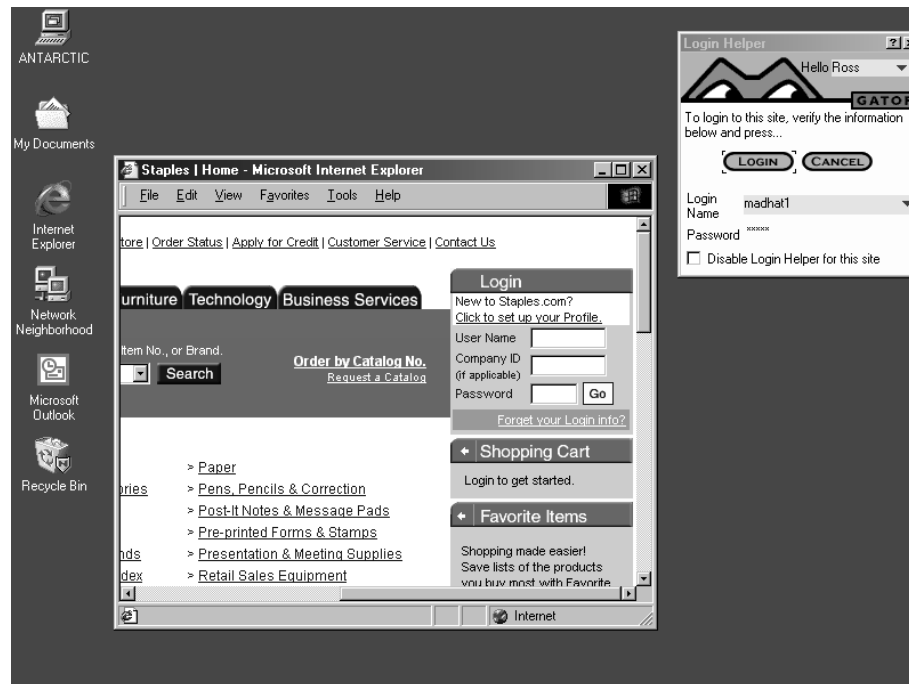


Figure 1.16

Smart online companion Gator fills in forms and remembers passwords.

WHAT'S AHEAD

Here's a brief introduction to the types of services for your small business or home office that you can acquire for free—or almost free—covered in the chapters ahead. You may not have a need for all, but gaining familiarity with the underlying concepts—and even a couple of technical definitions—will help you assess whether these capabilities would help you in your work.

In Chapter 2:

- **E-mail.** Would you like to access your e-mail over the Web? Do you need another account to separate your business e-mail from your personal correspondence?
- **Redirection.** Do you worry about missing your e-mail messages every time you need to switch e-mail addresses? With an e-mail redirection service, all messages coming to your forwarding e-mail account will be redirected to an existing e-mail address.
- **Voice mail, fax, and answering machines.** These voice mail services provide free phone numbers to receive and sometimes send voice and fax messages via e-mail.
- **Translation services.** In a global economy, you may sometimes need to communicate in an unfamiliar language—these free services help you get by.
- **Spam filtering.** Besides slow connection speeds, the main complaint of today's Internet users is the exasperating amount of unsolicited e-mail, better known as spam, that they receive. These services help keep the spammers out of your e-mailbox.

In Chapter 3:

- **Scheduling, appointments, and collaboration tools.** Get organized with free Web-based schedulers that provide address books, e-mail reminders, event tracking, appointment scheduling, to-do lists, messaging features, and more.
- **Webtops.** These virtual desktop sites store the files and applications you use everyday on a Web server so that you can access your information anywhere, anytime.
- **Mobile services.** These services can help you receive financial news and the latest stock quotes, and can even help you create Web pages on your personal digital assistant (PDA), such as a PalmPilot.

In Chapter 4:

- **Site hosting.** You're ready to hang out your shingle on the Web, but how can you do so most inexpensively? These hosting services give you free server space and often easy-to-use tools for posting your content.
- **HTML templates and graphics.** Even if you have dedicated Web production resources, you may need some divine inspiration or a quick boost for designing your pages more quickly. These resources include freely distributable HTML code to underlay your pages, as well as graphics you can use as-is or modify for your specific buttons, icons, or navigation bars.
- **Content.** Keeping a Web site continually updated is a challenge for any Webmaster. These content services arrange licensing deals with third-party content providers, who let you post their interactive headlines or search boxes in exchange for publicity.
- **Surveys, polls, and chat forums.** Letting your audience tell you what they want and what they think is a good way to keep them coming back to your Web site. These services let you quickly add interactivity to your Web site without any Web development on your part.

In Chapter 5:

- **Affiliate programs.** By placing ad banners and links to other online merchants on your site, you can receive commissions when your visitors click through and make a purchase.
- **Auctions.** Find out how to extend your commerce capabilities through these online auction services, which can bring together interested purchasers and enable the bidding process for you.
- **Escrow services.** For a minimal fee, these services will act as a go-between for buyers and sellers in online auctions.
- **Credit card processing.** Selling online is difficult if you can't process your customers' credit cards. Find out how these services can streamline this step for you.

In Chapter 6:

- **Small business portals.** You're not alone out there! These sites aggregate a wide variety of content and services with a special focus on the needs of small businesses.

- **Product research.** These sites give you the know-how to assess online vendors and products with input from consumers and experts, and even provide questionnaires that let you determine the feature set you need.

In Chapter 7:

- **Online banking.** You'll discover how financial services firms are offering a slew of services from low-cost stock trading to bill aggregation.
- **Shipping services.** To provide comprehensive customer service you'll need to be able to track the goods you ship and receive—these services make it easy.
- **Legal services and information.** These sites offer a wealth of legal information and advice if you're on the road to seeking legal representation.
- **Travel services.** Online reservations, bookings, and fare comparisons were key applications in the growth of the Web's popularity—find out what discounts and promotions you can take advantage of the next time you're traveling on business or for fun.

