

50plus Handyman



Home Networking

50plus Handyman director Roger Runswick discusses home networking and when to go wireless.

It's probably an unnoticed phenomenon but I'd place a reasonable bet that the number of wired telephone extensions being installed has dropped dramatically over the last few years and many existing ones are no longer used. The reason is that telephone extensions have swapped from being wired to wireless. The one thing that held this trend back was dial up Internet, as we needed to connect computers. Now around three-quarters of Internet users have swapped dial up for broadband and many have gone wireless, so the ubiquitous extension has declined in popularity again.

But is it quite like the suppliers would have us believe (images of working away under the apple tree come to mind)? Well no actually. Like many things technical it's not quite as straightforward as it seems. And like all things wireless there is the usual element of luck involved. Put simply it doesn't always work. So why not and what should be planned?

Wireless is a technology that depends on the propagation of radio waves. Radio waves are affected by building infrastructure, interference from other equipment and if working at the equipment's limit that great British variable the weather. As anyone with a modern wireless home phone knows digital signals don't degrade naturally like the old analogue ones, they either work or they don't. So couple that with the propagation issue and you find that your computer will work one side of a wall but not always the other, depending on useful variables like which day of the week it is and the barometric pressure.

So there is still a strong argument for good old wires. Not any old wires of course but those that can carry the most common computer linking standard called Ethernet, still the usual approach in offices. We know running cable is not easy, involving as it does taking up carpets and similar fun activities, but once installed the service is reliable. (Lateral thought - often the simplest method to run a cable is to route it outside then back in again. With the right coloured cable it's barely noticeable and incidentally perfectly safe).

So which way to go? It really depends on circumstances and a mix of wireless and cables is often the pragmatic way forward. If wireless prevents cables having to run across a room then it is likely to be the better solution. If you are a home worker wanting to work in a garden office then a good test is to try a DECT digital telephone. Put the base station where the wireless hub will be and take a handset to the garden office. If the signals not 100% solid then seriously consider cabling the computer connection, there's nothing worse than intermittent web access.

Many homes now require multiple computer connections so if in doubt consider getting some advice. Home networking is not for the faint hearted PC user (all those who selected Apple Macs sit back and gloat at this point). Radio does make it easier but it also introduces another variables into the equation so if something isn't working test from a cabled access point first.

NB. During the writing of this article DSG (formally Dixons) announced the start of a technical support service which will create up to 2,000 jobs. The company plans to invest £50m over five years on the new service, which will be called "The Techguys". DSG said eight out of 10 people in the UK need help with hi-tech goods. Probably says it all, doesn't it?

Roger Runswick is a director of 50plus Handyman and a member of the Institute of Electrical Engineers. He can be contacted at roger.runswick@the50plus.co.uk.