

# Write a cheque

Forget about having a friend over to fix your computer for a six-pack. Call up a real technician **By George Emerson**

THANKS TO TWO BIG NETWORK disasters—the Blaster worm and the August blackout—a lot of folks learned about the importance of firewalls, automatic data backup and other crucial variables of our hyper-networked world. This is especially true of people with home setups.

Until recently, my approach to troubleshooting was to either do it myself or ask advice from friends. Problem is, while it seems like I'm getting a deal, the advice is often worth what I pay for it—nothing.

I faced this situation recently in setting up a new home office. I had a list of problems I kept putting off—stuff like completing the cabling of a wired local area network (LAN) through my house, doing a security check on a wireless LAN setup, speeding up the operation of my computers (two Windows, one Mac), networking the peripherals (printers, scanner), creating a centralized backup system and reviewing my anti-virus measures. I ran all the networking cable through my house, and when it came time to fit the jacks properly onto the raw ends of the cable—a delicate job that can easily go wrong—I had about a 50% success rate. Then I got some wireless LAN gear, also known as WiFi, so I wouldn't have to fuss with cables. After a bunch more fussing, I realized I was wasting my time.

It was then that I decided to seek help: I called three computer service companies that offer what's known as outsourced or on-site service. Two have operations in many parts of the country: Nerds On Site ([www.nerds-onsite.com](http://www.nerds-onsite.com)) and Staples ([www.staples.ca](http://www.staples.ca)). The third is OutSource IT ([www.outsource-it.ca](http://www.outsource-it.ca)), an outfit that operates only in the Greater Toronto Area. In terms of a quality experience, Nerds On Site and OutSource IT provided efficient, friendly service with good advice that was easy to act on.



**Nerds On Site and OutSource IT provide prompt, helpful service in the comfort of your home**

Staples was far less impressive (see "User friendly," next page).

The first technician I tried was from Nerds On Site. He ran through my list, looked over all my gear and provided a written estimate that outlined a course of action. This included setting up an industrial-strength backup system with stand-alone file-server hardware and software. Shortly after, I tried OutSource IT. Its technician went through an assessment process similar to Nerds On Site and also provided a quote, including an option for a smaller-scale backup system that would be less expensive than buying stand-alone server hardware.

Nerds On Site completed the cabling and jacks for my wired network, tested all the outlets and installed a piece of hardware called an Ethernet switch. This creates what's known as a hardware firewall, which blocks attempts by hackers to hijack your computers and keeps out nasties like the Blaster worm.

In their initial assessments, Nerds

On Site and OutSource IT discovered that my computers were being probed many times a day by hacking software, something all too common when computers are connected to the internet by always-on high-speed connections to cable and DSL. Hackers can use these connections to steal data from computers or to park files they're moving around the internet—pirated movie files and so forth. An Ethernet switch, or another piece of hardware known as a router, blocks such hacking.

Nerds On Site also reviewed my WiFi hardware to ensure my security and network settings were okay. They weren't. WiFi transmitters, which work on the same principle as cordless phones, are becoming more popular in homes and offices, but the security settings are often disabled or are misconfigured. The result is that computers connected to the wireless network are wide open to be seen by anyone with a WiFi receiver, now built into many new notebooks. As I

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write this, for instance, the wireless receiver on my Apple PowerBook 17 is picking up my neighbour's WiFi signal, meaning his computer is open for me to see. If I was mischievous or malicious, I could steal all his data and even piggyback into the corporate network to which he has (supposedly) secure access.

Like Nerds On Site, OutSource IT delivers expertise in Windows and Mac operating systems, while many other computer service companies handle only Windows. Both recommended a few cost-effective upgrades, such as increasing memory and hard-drive space, which really sped up the machines' performance. As well, the new hard drive that OutSource IT added to my old Dell now serves as a networked file server, with an automated process that backs up all the files from my wife's computer each time she shuts it down; with a single click I can burn all the files onto a CD—an effective, low-cost backup system that works weekly or daily or as frequently as I wish.

Of course, all this convenience and expertise isn't free. Staples charges a \$120 minimum for visits, or \$60 an hour if the visit is more than two hours. Nerds On Site won't quote an hourly rate, but has a minimum \$99

flat rate (it provides custom quotes based on the nature of the work). Meanwhile, OutSource IT charges \$85 an hour, but the rate goes down if you buy time in advance "in bulk."

My advice: Spend the money. When the Blaster worm clogged the internet on Aug. 13, I had the comfort of knowing that my new firewall was keeping my computers safe. As an added precaution, I performed a backup the next morning. That afternoon, the massive Northeast grid blackout hit just as I was in the middle of working on a big project. If I hadn't been so cheap, I would've listened to the advice from OutSource IT and Nerds On Site and had what's called a UPS (uninterruptible power supply), which computers can tap for stored electricity after a power failure. That prevents sudden shutdowns that can damage computers and destroy data in such circumstances.

And mark my words: There *will* be a next time. Developing a relationship with a reliable on-site service company will help you be prepared. It'll also help you get the most out of your existing hardware, software and network, which most of us fail to use to their full capabilities. **IR**

Got a question or comment? Direct them to the author at [gemerson@globeandmail.ca](mailto:gemerson@globeandmail.ca)

## user friendly



### Nerds On Site

([www.nerdsonsite.com](http://www.nerdsonsite.com); 877-MY-NERDS) With technicians in Canada (and many parts of the U.S.) who zip around in bright red VW Beetles, this company aims to be the first to create a name brand in the world of outsourced computer service. The technician was quick and thorough, and the company was able to handle any question I had, including some obscure Mac issues.

### OutSource IT

([www.outsource-it.ca](http://www.outsource-it.ca); 416-410-0336) The techies arrive in white shirts and ties, projecting an old-school IBM image—fitting, because they're veterans of big-company IT departments. This is an operation in the Greater Toronto Area; when assessing a local company in your area, choose one that has a team of technicians and round-the-clock response. You don't want to discover that your local one-man shop is on holiday when your

computer tanks. OutSource IT was unfazed by any of the office technology problems I threw at them, although they declined to fix my old thermal-paper fax machine.

### Staples Business Services

([www.staples.ca](http://www.staples.ca); 888-723-3444)

The Staples on-site computer service is skewed to setting up new computers and peripherals they've sold you at their Business Depot stores across the country. To wit, when the Staples technician arrived and saw my Mac, he responded simply: "If we don't sell it, we definitely don't service it." They demurred on some of the more complex problems that both Nerds On Site and OutSource IT were quick to solve, though they did offer to follow up on a less complicated question about a little piece of networking gear, even if the answer took a couple of weeks and didn't help much in the end. Okay for basic stuff, but not much else.