



samag
Seminars for Arts Professionals

TECHNOLOGY BYTES AGAIN SEMINAR SUMMARY

Like any good journalist, all of my research, stories and admin documents are neatly filed on my Mac. They are, of course, appropriately labelled and arranged into handy subfolders.

Unfortunately, like any erratic, scatter-brained technophobic Luddite, none of these ever-so-carefully organised folders was backed up. So when I accidentally deleted (as in, never to be recovered) most of my precious files a month ago, you can imagine my barely-contained grief.

Calls to IT aficionados proved futile – I had actually done the unthinkable, and performed an action I couldn't control+Z my way out of. I learnt my lesson the excruciatingly painful way. If you listen to Stuart Wilkins, the red-blooded woman's IT buff, you don't have to.

Wilkins visited SAMAG for the second time this February to talk all things tech. The seminar, Technology Bytes Again, was a sequel to Wilkins's September 2007 seminar. As usual, he offered pared-down, practical advice for the technologically unarmed.

The Standard Four Computer Set-up

Most home users and small businesses use a four computer set-up. Basically, this means that up to four computers share a modem (that little black box that connects us to the Internet and beyond...), server and printer. Modems generally have just four ports, so adding more can be tricky. As your business expands and you need more computers, you can add another four port switch to your existing modem, which is a slow and burdensome option. The better way to expand, says Wilkins, is to upgrade to a more accommodating business grade switch that can be used by up to 24 computers.

TOP TIP: 16 port switches aren't too expensive, so if you have less than 16 computers, take this option.

Email Hosts and Domain Names

When it comes to email, most of us are happy to send, receive and leave the technical stuff to...well, anybody else, really. But when you're running your own arts organization, you might just be the last techie standing (even if you don't have a HTML bone in your body). Here's a quick tour around your inbox.

Most small businesses use "post office protocol" or "POP" email systems. These exist outside your computer and work like a virtual post office. That is, the mail arrives at an external address, and you retrieve it via your inbox (just like an actual post office and your letterbox). You can then send mail by delivering it to that external address. Hotmail and Gmail are good examples of POP email hosts.

You can have your own, more personalised email address by purchasing your own domain name – like www.stuartwilkins.net. You can then buy an email name – like help@stuartwilkins.net - from the same company. This is beneficial as it's often cheaper and it means that, since everything is operating from the same virtual address, things happen a lot more quickly. It also – thankfully – means that you don't have to manually ensure that your incoming emails go from your website to your inbox, as this is done automatically.

Owning a domain name and your own email host is great from a security perspective, as it means you can have 24-hour connectivity and also, that you can check your emails remotely from just about anywhere. However, this is also a fairly expensive option, and checking your emails from different locations gets tricky when it comes to backing them up.

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Inhouse email servers are a little different – your domain name will send your email to a permanent IP address that lives inside your computer. This way, you get loads of space and if your server goes down, the sender will receive a bounceback. Simple, huh? Not so fast – security can be an issue so you'll need a nice strong firewall.

TOP TIP: like mobile phone companies, domain registries and email hosts offer different plans. Shop around to see which suits your needs best.

Firewalls

Firewalls are the gates to your computer castle. Essentially, they allow certain safe information in and other information out. They act as your own virtual bouncers – if someone's name isn't on the door (that is, information is deemed unsafe or suspicious) the bouncers will knock it back.

Servers

Servers are basically big, virtual spaces that computers share. Your company might use a server to share files between employees, or to ensure that everyone uses the same printer. Servers are common resources, designed to be used by lots of people at any given time. They're pretty clever.

Servers are great for businesses, as they allow employees to share information, but also offer managers the choice to keep some information for certain employees only, using passwords.

But what happens if you decide to work in the comfort of your trackpants from home one day? You still need access to the server – how do you access it from your couch? With great caution, says Wilkins.

Remote access through a virtual private network (VPN) is very useful – it connects to your company's server in much the same way as the Internet allows you to view a website. But it can also cause security headaches. Viruses on your home computer can make their way onto the company's server via the VPN – which is unlikely to endear you to your boss. The best way to connect remotely? With a company laptop, says Wilkins.

When purchasing a server, Wilkins offers the following advice:

Windows Server and Exchange Server: Great – but you have to buy the server software and then all subsequent licenses for different computers accessing the server.

Windows Small Business Server: A cheaper alternative that offers shared printer, email and files together. The catch? It's only available for up to five users.

Apple Server: Will only work with Macs and Apple boxes...which can cost up to \$4700. Ouch.

Linux: Is free! But – there's no technical support. So if you want to save your pennies, you'd better know your way around a hard drive (or enlist a savvy and generous friend).

TOP TIP: Wilkins suggests visiting www.donortec.com.au for bargain basement software. It's only available to not-for-profit and charity organizations, but if you're eligible it's well worth a look.

Stuart Wilkins has provided notes for your reference at his website www.stuartwilkins.net/samag