
Free Technical Support On The Web

A number of Web sites offer personal, human-to-human technical support free of charge. The way this support is provided does vary, as does the quality of the answers, so it's worth investigating which site works best for you.

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As a support professional, you probably know of many Web sites where you can obtain free technical information to help you in your work. For example, your hardware and software vendors probably run sites where you can access help files, FAQs, knowledge bases and the like. What you might not know is that there are also many sites available where you can put specific technical questions to human experts and get a personal response. Most of these sites are staffed by people with a wide range of expertise who are willing and able to help you solve your technical problems. They are independent of hardware and software vendors, and generally offer sound, unbiased advice.

What's more, most of these sites are completely free. Instead of charging for their services, they are financed either through advertising or by collecting marketing data. At best, a site will carry unobtrusive onscreen advertisements which you are free to ignore. In some cases you will have to register before you can access some or all of the site's services. This usually involves entering your personal details or contact information, which the site operator will then use for marketing purposes. You might notice an increase in unsolicited email or phone calls when you start using these services. Whether that's a price worth paying is for you to decide. In fact, most of the sites which collect personal data offer a way of opting out of receiving marketing messages. However, you will usually have to search hard to find out how to take advantage of this. (A good place to look is the site's privacy statement. Look for a tiny link to it tucked away somewhere on the home page.) It's well worth setting up a separate email address to use with such services, rather than suppling your primary one.

Quality Of Service

But can a free support service really provide the quality of technical advice you need? After all, the people giving the advice are not accountable to you in any way, and there would probably be nobody for you to sue if things went wrong. As you might expect, the quality of these services varies considerably. In some cases, the resident experts will give speedy and accurate responses to straightforward questions from novice users, but are often stumped by more complicated problems. Some of their responses are misleading and others are downright wrong. And even quite easy questions sometimes go unanswered. But these are very much the exceptions. For the most part, the quality of advice provided by these sites is surprisingly high. Most of the answers are accurate, response times are generally good - typically four hours or less - and the overall standard of service is competent and professional. In general, these sites are at least as efficient as the major vendors' official support programmes, and some are very much better.

Our Evaluation

In order to evaluate the sites described in this article, I studied the queries previously submitted by visitors and checked the answers they received. In every case, I also submitted at least two questions of my own: one fairly easy one, the other more challenging. For the first question, I asked for advice on transferring a collection of favourites from one computer to another, assuming that both machines had IE 5.0 installed. With one exception, all the sites were able to give me a quick answer. Most of them explained how to copy shortcuts from the Favorites folder. However, only three of them (32bit.Com, About.Com and Com-

puting.Net) mentioned the Import/Export command, which is a faster and more convenient way of doing the job.

For my second question, I said that I was performing an administrative install of Office 2000 from a central directory, using the custom installation wizard to create a transform. I wanted to let the users run the Setup program in interactive mode so that they could decide which components to install. But there were certain components which I wanted to prevent them from installing. Was there a way of disabling or hiding these components in the installation states tree? I did not receive a satisfactory answer to this question. Several of the experts gave me good general advice on customising the deployment of Office 2000, but none of them provided the specific information I needed. (The answer I was looking for was that I could right-click on a component in step 7 of the custom installation wizard and select Hide; this would remove the component from the installation tree as seen by the end-user.)

One reason for the lack of success with this second test might be that, in many cases, there was no obvious place to post the question. Most of the sites are organised into broad categories. These tend to cover either various versions of Windows, or more general topics such as the Internet, but not specific applications like Office 2000. At Computing.Net, for instance, I had to post the question in the Windows NT section. This might have limited the exposure it received and reduced the number of responses that were forthcoming. So which is the best site to use? The answer depends on the type of help you are looking for and how much effort you are prepared to go to in order to get it. For the next part of the article, I'll describe seven leading free sites, plus a few others that you might want to consider. (Note that, unless otherwise stated, the URL of each site is the same as the name of the service, but with a www prefix.)

32bit.Com

32bit.Com's main role is as a shareware download site, but it also hosts a section called 32-Bit Help Forums. These are essentially message boards where you can post questions in one of five main categories: Windows 95/98, Windows NT, Windows 2000, Windows CE and Linux. Within each category, there are various sub-categories, such as hardware, utilities, Internet and development.

This site is different from most of the others described in this article in that it does not rely on a permanent pool of experts. Anyone can post a question, and anyone can reply to it or comment on the reply. But, unlike with the traditional BBS or newsgroups, the content is carefully moderated. The moderator will edit or delete messages which are misleading or inappropriate, and will try to help any questioner whose message would otherwise go unanswered. The site is popular with individual end-users rather than technical people, and the nature of the queries tends to reflect this. However, the people who regularly answer the queries appear to be knowledgeable, and their answers are usually helpful and accurate. Several people correctly answered my question about transferring favourites (see Figure 1), but none of them was able to help with my Office 2000 problem. I received a response to my first question just a few minutes after I posted it. But this was exceptional. More typically, the turnaround is about three to four hours, and sometimes a lot longer.

Any visitor to the site is free to peruse existing messages. But if you want to post a new question or reply to an existing one, you will have to register. This is free and anonymous. You don't need to give your real name - most users have nicknames - but you must give a valid email address in order to receive replies to your queries.



Figure 1 - 32bit.Com.

The site is reasonably easy to navigate. You can drill down through the categories to reach the list of questions, or you can search for words in the message text, using an optional date filter. Unfortunately, you can only search in one sub-section at a time, which is a minor drawback. Once you have found a question you are interested in, you can read the entire thread on a single page - you don't have to navigate through individual messages. Message threads are eventually archived and removed from the main board. You can search the archives, but obviously you cannot reply to archived messages.

About.Com

This is the largest and best known of the sites reviewed here (see Figure 2). It covers a huge range of topics - not just technical ones. For PC support people, the most interesting section is Computers And Technology, which hosts over 50 specialised sub-sections. These include various hardware and software categories, as well as such topics as networking, operating systems (Linux and OS/2 are well covered), programming languages, training and careers. There is also an Internet/Online category, but this is aimed more at end-users and families, with sub-sections on online shopping, Internet for kids, and so forth. However, it also covers anti-virus software, Internet conferencing and a few other subjects of interest to professionals.

Each of the site's many sub-sections is in the charge of an expert moderator, called a guide. In the computer-related sections, almost all the guides work in the industry, and most have many years of experience. Guides are carefully screened by About.Com, and in some sections there is a waiting list for applicants. The guide determines what goes into his or her sub-section. In most cases, the guide will provide technical articles, tip sheets, FAQs and the like. There is also an informal chat room and an email newsletter service. More importantly, each guide hosts a discussion forum, which is where visitors post individual questions. It is usually the guide who answers these questions, although anyone is free to contribute a response or add a comment. In some cases, this leads to quite lengthy threads, and messages are often posted by site visitors who obviously know a lot about the topics being discussed.

The responses to my test questions were speedy and helpful, and I was generally impressed with the expertise of the guides I consulted. I received my first replies within a few hours of posting the questions, which seems to be typical for the site.

Unfortunately, navigating the discussion forums can be quite tedious. You have to do a lot of drilling down before you find a particular message. The full thread cannot be viewed on a single page, so you have to laboriously step through it to read each of the messages in turn. As with 32bit.Com, anyone can read existing messages, but you must register before you can post messages of your own. To register, you must supply your real name and email address, but no other contact details are required. About.Com sends targeted email to registered users.

AllExperts.Com

This site operates very much on a one-to-one basis. You start by selecting an expert, which you do either by browsing a category listing or by searching on keywords. Once you have chosen the person you think best able to help, you post your question to him or her direct. No-one else sees the question until it has been answered, and there is no way that other visitors can contribute to the reply (see Figure 3). Because the experts are listed within fairly broad categories, you need to study their profiles quite carefully to determine who is best able to help with a particular problem. Fortunately, most of the profiles are very detailed; many of them also specify any areas in which the person is weak. To help you evaluate the profiles, the experts are rated according to feedback from existing users.

The site has 20 main categories. The one most relevant to support staff is Computers & Internet, which is divided into sub-categories such as graphics, programming, databases, Web development, spreadsheets and word processing. Within the sub-categories, the quality of advice on offer varies considerably. On the whole, the standard is high. Most of the experts give detailed and accurate responses, even to quite complex questions. But I also noticed many vague and incomplete answers, not to mention one or two serious inaccuracies. My own question on transferring favourites was answered promptly and correctly.

As an additional service, the site operates a traditional message board, to which anyone can post questions or replies. However, this is not moderated, and in general the experts don't contribute to it. It is quite separate from the main part of the site. There is no charge of any kind for using AllExperts.Com, and no need to register. You must provide an email address when asking a question, and this will appear in your message. But the site operators do not collect these addresses or use them in any way.



Figure 2 - About.Com.



Figure 3 - AllExperts.Com.

Askme.Com

Like the two previous sites, Askme.Com is not just aimed at computer people. It covers 14 broad categories, only one of which - Technology And The Web - is relevant to technical support staff. This category is divided into some two dozen sections, including hardware, networks, security, databases, programming and operating systems. Users are free to suggest new sections in any category. A team of volunteers is on hand to answer the questions, with each volunteer claiming expertise in a specialised area. The site operators make no attempt to check the credentials of these people, but their career details and profiles are on display for all to read. This adds a measure of credibility. In the computer-related sections, most of the experts are IT professionals, although there are also a few students and hobbyists.

A key feature of the site is the way that regular users and experts form a community. If you use the site frequently, you will soon get to know the experts in the areas which are important to you. In fact, one of the main ways to use the site is to search for the expert you think is best able to deal with your problem, then post a question specifically for that person to deal with. If you prefer, you can post general questions, which any expert is then free to answer (see Figure 4). Either way, the questions and answers are available for all visitors to read. To view an existing question, you either drill down through the hierarchy of topics, or search by keyword. Eventually, you reach a page of message headers. You then drill down one more time to read a thread.

Some of the sections are very crowded, and it often takes quite a lot of drilling and scrolling before you find the questions you have previously posted. To avoid this, you can set up a personal page on which to view all your own questions and the resulting threads. In addition, when you post a question, you can choose to receive an email notification of the response. If you plan to use the site regularly, these two features can be great time savers. To use any part of the site - even just reading existing messages - you must provide an email address. The site operators use this to build mailing lists which are sold to other companies.

Askme.Com appears to attract a high proportion of knowledgeable users, many of whom post quite challenging questions. But there is a lot of variation in how well these are answered. My own test questions were handled well - the responses being detailed and informative. The answers came within a couple of hours of posting the questions, which seems typical for the site. But, in some sections, the experts take a day or more to answer, and the quality of some replies is doubtful. Although the experts are volunteers, they have a strong incentive to provide a good service. Each expert is rated according to how many questions he or she answers and how satisfied the user is with the response. Highly-rated experts receive cash payments from the site operators.

Computing.Net

This is a refreshingly slim site - light on graphics, and with few advertisements to distract you. But the range of subjects is sparse, and there are no resident experts to ensure the quality of the advice. Essentially, Computing.Net is a bulletin board. It deals only with computer matters, and is organised into 11 forums. Each of these is specific to an operating system (they include Unix, Novell, Mac and Linux, as well as all versions of Windows). There are no sections devoted to particular hardware products or applications, these being dealt with in the main forums. To browse existing messages, you click on the operating system of your choice. This brings up a page showing the headers of all recent messages. You then drill down to see the full questions and replies (see Figure 5). You can post your own messages from any page, which makes navigation very easy.

The site's main drawback is that it relies on visitors to answer each other's questions. With no experts or moderators in charge, there is no check on the accuracy of the answers. Nor is there any way of verifying the credentials of those taking part. Indeed, all participation is anonymous. This doesn't necessarily mean that the quality of advice is low. For the most part, the answers are accurate, and if someone gives incorrect or incomplete information, someone else will usually step in to correct it. That's what happened with my question on transferring favourites. The first respondent told me how to do the job by copying shortcuts;

“Askme.Com appears to attract a high proportion of knowledgeable users, many of whom post quite challenging questions.”

a second person then pointed out that it would be easier to use the Import/Export command. Both responses were posted within minutes of the original question. However, I also noticed a higher proportion of mistakes than with most of the other sites in this article. One noteworthy example: a visitor who was obviously a novice asked how to find the amount of free disk space in DOS, and was told to use FDISK.

As well as the forums, Computing.Net hosts a collection of useful how-to articles, a tool for searching shareware sites, and another for searching the drivers database at www.drivershq.com. It also has a set of FAQs, these being based on the questions commonly asked in the forums.

Experts Exchange

Experts Exchange (www.expertsexchange.com) is unusual in that it uses a points system as a sort of internal currency. You receive 75 points when you register. You earn further points by providing personal information for marketing purposes, and also by being active on the site for a given period. You use your points to “buy” answers to questions.

As a support professional, you will probably find that this arrangement limits the usefulness of the site. When you have a problem, you want it solved with the minimum of fuss. You certainly don't want to worry about whether you have enough points to pay for an answer. In any case, even if you used the site actively, you would probably never accrue enough capital to pose more than three or four questions a month. Nevertheless, the site does seem to attract a large number of IT professionals. The questions are often quite difficult or advanced in nature, and they are generally answered carefully and accurately. Turnaround time is typically under two hours. That said, it is not clear who the experts are, what their qualifications are, or how they are recruited. There are no personal profiles or CVs on display, and the experts tend not to use their real names. Based on the answers I checked, the experts do appear to be knowledgeable and experienced, but the site would be more credible if you knew who you were dealing with.

Experts Exchange covers a large range of topics. As well as the usual categories for operating systems and general hardware, there are sections for databases, programming, Web development, graphics, hand-held computers, Mac, and many specific applications. These sections are fully searchable, or you can drill down to find the topics of interest.

GoofyGuys.Com

From a support person's viewpoint, this is the least useful of the sites reviewed here. It offers no hierarchy of topics, nor is there any way of browsing existing questions. It is possible to search for questions using keywords, but when I tested this I found it to be a hit-and-miss affair. The database of existing questions appears to be quite small. The site operators themselves answer all the questions, and answers are sent by email, so you don't need to keep re-visiting the site to see if you have received a response. There is no obvious way of following up a question, and no way for other visitors to comment on the answers or to add further information.

This was the only site which completely failed to answer either of my test questions. Even my relatively easy question on transferring favourites did not produce a response. All I received was an automatically-generated acknowledgement message. On the positive side, you don't have to register to use the site. You do need to enter your name, email address and phone number each time you ask a question, but the site operators say that these details won't be used in any way other than to answer the question (it's not clear why they require your phone number for this).

Tech Republic

Tech Republic (www.techrepublic.com) hosts some 40 forums - which for some unexplained reason are called republics - all aimed at IT professionals. The forums are not moderated in any way, nor are there any resident experts on hand to ensure that every question is answered. Despite this, the quality of advice is very



Figure 4 - Askme.Com.

high. The forum members come across as being very knowledgeable people, and most questions receive prompt and accurate responses. An interesting aspect of the site is that it caters not only for technicians and support staff, but also for IT consultants, trainers, personnel managers, board-level managers and recruitment specialists. There are specialised forums for these groups, covering such topics as classroom techniques, recruitment issues and outsourcing.

Tech Republic is completely free, but you will need to register in order to access most of the content. To do so, you must provide an email address and approximate geographic location, but no other personal details are asked for.

Fee-Based Sites

So far, this article has concentrated on free support sites. As we have seen, these sites can help you solve many of your technical problems, but there will often be times when they fail to deliver the answers you need. In these cases, you might decide to use a fee-based service instead.

One possibility is to use a site which will put you in touch with a fellow professional or consultant, who will then help solve your problems in return for payment. The consultant works directly for you, but the site takes a commission on the fee. Unlike with traditional consultancies, these sites have the advantage of letting you purchase assistance in tiny quantities. Instead of paying a consultant to spend whole days at a time at your office, you can buy just a few minutes of the expert's time, or even just purchase a simple answer to a straightforward question. Often the amounts involved can be met from petty cash.

Exp.Com

The most comprehensive of these sites is Exp.Com. Amongst other services, it offers a feature called Express Connect. This is ideal for users who want an expert to talk them through a procedure or give them step-by-step guidance on a problem without the cost of a visit. To use the service, you locate an expert by searching their profiles, then arrange for them to contact you, either by email, phone or in a private chat room. You negotiate the rate directly with the expert. The fee is usually on a per-minute basis. Another way of using Exp.Com is to post details of your problem in a public message area. If you are lucky, someone will reply with an immediate solution, free of charge. More likely, you will receive bids from consultants who will offer to help you solve the problem on a fee-paying basis (Figure 6). It is up to you to decide which bid, if any, to accept. Any further details are then a matter of negotiation between you and the consultant.

“AllExperts.Com operates very much on a one-to-one basis. You start by selecting an expert, which you do either by browsing a category listing or by searching on keywords.”



Figure 5 - Computing.Net.

To help you judge the quality of the consultants, the site operates a rating system based on feedback from other users. You can also obtain references from existing clients, just as if you were hiring the consultant in the traditional way. All billing and payments are handled through Exp.Com. In the case of the Express Connect service, payment must be made by credit card.

EPeople.Com

A similar service is provided by EPeople.Com. As with Exp.Com, this site lets you post details of your problem. Its registered “service providers” will then bid for your business. But, in this case, there is no message board, no way for visitors to view other users’ questions, and no way of choosing the expert by searching their profiles. Fees are negotiated between the consultant and the client, with the site operators handling the billing and payments.

Resource Sites

To finish this article, I’ll mention some other sites which provide free help for support staff. These sites don’t necessarily let you pose specific questions to human experts, but they do offer other forms of technical assistance.

Ehow.Com

Ehow.Com is essentially a database containing thousands of articles, each of which gives step-by-step instructions for solving a particular problem or performing a specific task. For example, there are articles on how to schedule a meeting in Outlook, how to avoid duplicate values in an Access database, and how to find custom maps online.

You can find an article either by searching for likely words in the text or by drilling down through a broad hierarchy of categories. Most of the topics that are likely to interest IT people are in the Computers category, this being sub-divided into hardware, applications, home electronics, operating systems, Internet/networking, and World Wide Web. Ehow.Com is completely free, with no registration of any kind required. It is financed by onscreen advertising and links to online shopping sites.

“For the most part, the quality of advice provided by these sites is surprisingly high. The overall standard of service is competent and professional.”

The screenshot shows the Exp.Com website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Home, Search for an Expert, Public Questions, My EXP, Help, and Login. The main content area is titled "Public Questions" and shows a question about defragmentation. The question details include a target price of \$35, one proposal, and an expiration date of August 02, 2000. Below the question, there's a table of current proposals.

Expert	Price	Delivery	Proposal	View
Brian Tester	\$10 flat	attached	Thank you for your question! As an independent computer consultant, my solutions are backed with equipment research and testing. Need more help? Just...	(expand all)

Figure 6 - Exp.Com.

MyHelpDesk.Com

This very comprehensive site can best be described as a portal. Although it hosts some useful pages of its own, its main role is to guide visitors to other sites which offer specific help and support. It provides access to many hundreds of such sites, including some which are dedicated to quite obscure products and technologies. MyHelpDesk.Com is organised into some 60 categories. These mainly cover the popular operating systems, applications, databases, programming languages and hardware products. But there are also some slightly more specialised topics - voice recognition, blocking and filtering tools, and video conferencing hardware, to name a few.

To use the service, you first drill down to the product or topic of interest, then select the type of site you want to visit. You can choose between resource directories, help forums, training sites, alert services, sites offering tips and tricks, and several others. When you follow a link to a specific site, the site opens in a frame within the main MyHelpDesk.Com window.

PC Support Centre

This site (at www.pcsupport.com) provides various online services, including virus scans, disk maintenance services, software updates and online space for backups. There is also an advocacy service, which claims to represent the interests of consumers in disputes with vendors. All these services are free, but the site collects personal information for marketing purposes.

Conclusion

Clearly, there is no shortage of places on the Web where you can call on human experts for advice in solving technical problems. The quality of these services varies widely, and you will need to be discriminating in how you use them. Posting the same question in every available site would not be a sensible approach. It makes more sense to concentrate on just one or two sites that you know you can trust.

So which ones should you use? Based on my own testing, I would especially recommend About.Com and Askme.Com. These seem to provide the most consistent quality, although they are unfortunately not the easiest of sites to navigate. 32bit.Com is also worth considering, as is Experts Exchange, if you can live with its awkward points system. If you want to consider a fee-based service, Exp.Com is the most comprehensive and easiest to use. It is probably the easiest way to buy consultancy services in small quantities. Finally, Tech Republic is worth getting to know. Even if you don't use its forums, it has plenty of other useful content on offer.

Whatever site you choose, be sure to devote some time to familiarising yourself with its navigation techniques and its overall structure. You should also try to get to know the experts in residence - you will want to find out which ones you can depend on for sound and timely advice. With luck, you will end up with a very useful source of technical assistance - and one that won't require you to raid your departmental budget.

“Instead of charging for their services, the sites are financed either through advertising or by collecting marketing data.”

PCSA

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[Windows Backup Software](#)

In this review we looked at 18 different backup software products for home or SOHO use. In the end we could only recommend six though only two were good enough to get our "Editor's Choice" award

[The 46 Best Freeware Programs](#)

There are many free utilities that perform as well or better than expensive commercial products. Our Editor Ian Richards picks out his selection of the very best freeware programs and he comes up with some real gems.