

Internet services (including mobile internet services)

What they are and what they can do

Until about 5 years ago, most SMEs only needed a phone, a fax machine and the postal service to be able to communicate with customers and suppliers. Now, connection to the Internet is increasingly becoming a vital tool and is creating many more opportunities for flexible working by SMEs in remote rural regions.

An Internet Service Provider (ISP) will provide you with an e-mail service, access to the world wide web (i.e. all of the sources of information and trade on the internet) and will probably also host your own web pages. You can connect to your chosen ISP using an ordinary telephone or ISDN line or using a broadband connection such as ADSL or a cable modem.

ISPs come in many flavours. Some provide a 'free' service and make their money from advertising and what you pay for the phone calls needed to access the service. These 'free' ISPs are very popular and it can be difficult to get a connection to some of them at some times of the day. You may also have to ring a premium rate telephone number if you need advice from their helpdesk. Other ISPs charge a flat monthly fee for access to the Internet and this fee includes the cost of the telephone calls or broadband link used to access the service. However, although these are often described as 'unlimited' access, many of them impose a limit on how long you can be connected in total each month or on any one session. Finally there are ISPs who charge a smaller monthly fee but users also have to pay call charges.

Key messages for SMEs

- Internet access is an important way of reducing your isolation.
- E-mail is a major tool for contacting anybody at any time.
- A good ISP is crucial to success.
- Mobile internet access is possible but is very slow.



A typical ISP's web page

All ISPs provide an **e-mail** service, often letting you have a number of addresses that you can allocate to individuals or departments within your company. E-mails are an excellent way of sending notes to people anywhere in the world (as long as they have an e-mail address) and they often take only a few minutes to arrive. Files from a PC can also be attached to e-mails, so documents or designs can also be sent across the world at low cost and high speed. To send and receive e-mails, you need a piece of software called an 'e-mail client' on your PC. These normally come with the PC or are supplied free of charge by the ISP. Examples include Microsoft's Outlook Express and Netscape's Communicator.

The Internet allows access to a vast range of information on "**web sites**" around the world. Many companies also trade through web sites and some offer lower prices if you do business with them in this way. To access the web sites, you need piece of software called a 'browser'. Most PCs are sold with a browser, such as Microsoft's Internet Explorer or Netscape's Navigator, already installed but, if not, your ISP will provide you with one or upgrade your existing browser to the latest version. These browsers allow you to receive audio and video from web sites as well as text and still pictures. Most ISPs will also offer you the choice of creating your own website, which they make available to all other Internet users. Tools are available which make it easy to create a basic website that can promote your company to a worldwide audience. Even if you only trade regionally or nationally, a company website can make your company visible to a much larger number of potential customers.

The **Wireless Access Protocol (WAP)** has made the Internet available to mobile users with suitably equipped phones. At present, the service is very slow, is not easy to use and only contains text and very limited graphics from a relatively small number of sites. WAP phones can also send and receive simple e-mails.

An alternative way of accessing the Internet when on the move is to use a laptop PC or a PDA connected via a mobile phone. The speed of the connection is currently only about 20% of that available over an ordinary phone line, so downloading web pages or handling e-mails is a slow process.



WAP phone

The introduction of higher speed mobile connections (such as GPRS¹) will make both WAP and laptop/PDA mobile Internet access more attractive. Regular mobile Internet users will probably prefer the laptop/PDA approach because it presents the information in more or less the same way as it would appear on a desktop PC. However, the WAP phone is a much more compact solution and will appeal to the casual user or the user who only wants relatively basic information whilst on the move.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The Internet literally opens up a whole new world of potential customers and suppliers to an SME.

e-mail is a rapid way of exchanging information with suppliers, customers and collaborators in other locations. A web page is a good way of telling the world about your company. However, it must be kept up-to-date and it must be registered with “search engines” so that people can find it.

Mobile users can also access the Internet by connecting laptops or PDAs to it via their mobile phones. Alternatively they can access cut-down versions of the services using a WAP phone. Mobile access to the Internet is relatively slow unless you use the recently introduced GPRS service. Higher speed access will be offered by the next generation (3G) of mobile communications services.

An Internet connection not only offers you access to the outside world but also potentially allows anybody to access your PCs. You need to install suitable security devices to guard against this. These are described in the briefing on Security Tools.

What to buy

Before selecting your Internet Service Provider, you need to think about the total cost of your Internet service. If you use the Internet a lot, the call charges can mount up rapidly and a ‘free’ ISP could actually prove more expensive than one who offers unlimited access for a monthly fee. Unlimited access² deals are on offer for about €20 a month and, in some areas, you can get an ‘always-on’ broadband Internet connection for as little as €40 a month.

However the cheapest deal may not be the best one. A small business should also consider the quality of service provided by an ISP. This is harder to predict than the monthly bill, but your national PC and Internet magazines³ will offer regular reviews of the ISPs operating in your country. These reviews will rank their performance against various criteria. A small business needs an ISP that offers high levels of service availability and good customer support if things go wrong.

Irrespective of whom you eventually choose as your ISP, it is worth signing up with a couple of ‘free’ service providers. It costs nothing and, should your preferred ISP have technical problems, you can use one of them as a back-up way of accessing the Internet.

To use WAP you need a special handset, but it may not cost much more than one of the latest mobile phones. Your local mobile phone shops can show you what is available and should be able to demonstrate the service to you. They can also advise you about which of the many mobile phone tariffs would best suit the way you intend to use your phone. They, or your local computer store, can offer advice on how to connect your laptop or PDA to the Internet via your mobile phone.

Questions to ask suppliers

- How much will your service cost me per month (including call charges) if I use it 1, 2 or 4 hours per day?
- How many e-mail addresses can I have?
- Can I access my e-mail from a public Internet terminal (e.g. in a hotel or airport)?

¹ GPRS (General Packet Radio System) is an enhancement of the GSM system that allows mobile phones to send and receive data at speeds closer to those achievable on a fixed phone. More details are given in the ‘Mobile Communications’ technology briefing.

² These are normally called ‘unmetered access’ because there is no meter measuring how long you are connected for and charging you for that time.

³ Many of them have websites where you can look at past reviews of ISPs

- Can several people use the service simultaneously from different computers?
- Do you offer a web hosting service and, if so, how big a website can I have?
- Is there a minimum subscription period?
- What level of service availability do you aim to provide?
- How can I tell if my computer has the right hardware and software to receive the service?
- If I need to talk to your helpdesk, how much will it cost me per minute and how long will I have to wait for the call to be answered?

For connecting a laptop or PDA to the Internet via a mobile phone

- What extra equipment (if any) do I need and how much does it cost?

When buying a WAP phone

- Can you demonstrate the services that it offers?
- What are the tariff options and the minimum subscription period?