Better Use of Your Computer

for NGOs

by **Jon Anderson & Maeve Moynihan**

networklearning.org

November 2005

CONTENTS

NOTE: This document is a work in progress. Send your specific questions and suggestions to: info@networklearning.org

1   Setting up your NGO's computer as well as possible

The ergonomics – how our bodies function in workplaces*:*

When arranging your office and its computer, consider the following:
⇒ Each workstation should have an optimal arrangement of chair, screen and keyboard for comfort *and to avoid damaging health*: people who work on computers for long periods risk Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) in their wrists and arms and also risk backache.
⇒ Office chairs should be comfortable and supportive.
⇒ Computer users should get up and move about – at least once an hour.
⇒ More basic information at http://eeshop.unl.edu/rsi.html
⇒ More detailed information at www.office-ergo.com

Your office should accommodate the disabled. Workstations should be accessible (reachable) by wheelchair.

You may have workers with poor eyesight or workers who spend long hours on the computer and risk damaging their eyes. Consider:
⇒ Spectacles: Ask computer users to check their spectacles. With far-sighted people, a slightly weaker prescription may be better than their daily spectacles. Do they have other glasses they could try?
⇒ More about computers and vision including useful eye exercises at http://www.visionworksusa.com/computereyestrain.htm
⇒ Lighting and screen settings are important: see www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/ergonomics/office/eye_discomfort.html
⇒ Font sizes: Many people find the work easier for their eyes if the onscreen text is a bigger size. This can be done globally by setting a lower screen resolution, e.g. 800 x 600 instead of 1024 x 768 (instructions for changing screen

resolution in Windows: http://www.tacktech.com/display.cfm?ttid=207).
Within individual programs, such as Word, there is usually a 'zoom' function, allowing you to view the document at perhaps 120% instead of 100% size. And when you create text documents don't just stick to the default settings of the programme, but explore the options; perhaps choose a typeface and size that is comfortable to work with.

Your personal computer (pc) is *your* tool. You can and should customise it to suit you: www.abilitynet.org.uk/myway

The system/software:
Your operating system (OS) is probably a version of Microsoft (MS) Windows and therefore this guide reflects that reality.

You may have Microsoft Office programs as well. If not, there are realistic alternatives to using MS software:
⇒ A great alternative to MS Office is the free OpenOffice software (see www.OpenOffice.org) which includes a word processor, a spreadsheet, a presentation manager etc. and works transparently with a variety of file formats, including those of MS Office. A list of distributors of localized versions on CD-ROM is at http://distribution.openoffice.org/cdrom/
⇒ A safer and faster web browser than MS Internet Explorer is Firefox at www.mozilla.com/firefox/
⇒ More alternatives to Microsoft at http://microsoft.toddverbeek.com/

Illegally copied software is common in many countries. However with the internet, you have legal access to freeware (i.e. free software) and shareware (definition of shareware at http://www.pc-shareware.com/aspfaq.htm) to further improve and customise your computer. Only download software from reputable websites, such as the ones below. Before you download anything, always check the file size is not too big for your connection, and that it will be compatible with your computer/OS.
⇒ A basic set of tools for your computer at http://aern.cba.ua.edu/tools.html
⇒ Free windows utilities at http://www.winfiles.com/ or www.download.com
⇒ LOTS of free and shareware software: www.tucows.com

2   Making your staff computer-literate

Everyone should be familiar with the basics:
There are some basic computer skills that everyone in the NGO should learn – like starting and closing down the computer, opening a new Word file, typing into a pre-set layout, receiving and answering emails.

Organise and find enough time for training in these skills. To enable everyone to learn, you need to provide the first round of coaching – then provide support for when things go wrong or a new skill needs to be injected. Then, as people learn basic skills, they can teach those skills to colleagues and so on. Encourage an atmosphere of sharing and constantly updating skills.

Make sure staff understand the basics of how a computer stores information, especially the concepts of files (documents) and folders (where you put them).
⇒ What are computer files? http://it-help.bathspa.ac.uk/fileman/file_whatsandwheres.html

Make sure staff are familiar with Windows Explorer and the folder system:
⇒ http://it-help.bathspa.ac.uk/fileman/file_explorer.html
⇒ http://www.learnthat.com/courses/computer/directory/

Make sure staff understand the basics of the Windows OS:
⇒ http://www.learnthat.com/courses/computer/windows/

Everyone should learn the standard keycode shortcuts. They will save seconds each time – which will soon translate into hours, days and weeks of saved time:
⇒ http://it-help.bathspa.ac.uk/basics_3.html

Make sure staff use logical naming of files and a logical folder structure. Do not keep hundreds of documents in one folder, but create meaningful sub-folders. For example, at the top level you have separate folders for finance, fundraising, projects etc. and within these, separate folders for each project etc. If you nevertheless lose track of where a file is, you can always get the computer to help find it:
⇒ http://www.learnthat.com/courses/computer/findfiles/

Ensure you have a policy and procedure for making 'back-ups' of your important files.
⇒ More info at www.argentuma.com/backup/guide.html

Problems? There will be. So encourage self-sufficiency:
⇒ Show your staff how to use Windows in-built Help and individual programmes' help menus – to look for and find answers to specific problems.
⇒ Consult the physical manual if you have one (or look for a digital version on the internet if you don't).
⇒ Check the MS official 'knowledgebase' at http://support.microsoft.com/
⇒ Use online help; there are discussion forums on everything under the sun, and people who are itching to share their experience and knowledge
⇒ A great way to gain computer confidence is to explore. So look at the various menu options in programmes. See what they do. To be safe, work on a test document – and get to know the Undo keycode (control-z)!

Internet connection? Use it.
Some people are nervous of computers, and see them as things that demand skills they do not have. Such people could spend fifteen minutes having fun with a search engine. Most people use Google (www.google.com) They can get comfortable with some of the things that computers can do. For example:
⇒ Do you half-remember a song or a poem? Type what you remember into Google and find the whole thing.
⇒ Do you want to know more about anything –the Wild West, or reiki or a cooking recipe for fish? Type the keywords into Google and you will find listed a bunch of websites. Remember that, as with the rest of the web, much of what you find will be rubbish. But some will be fine. Or do you want a picture of

a water point in one specific country? Ten minutes with Google will find it – probably.

⇒ More on researching the Web at www.networklearning.org/web.html

3　Improving the English of the NGO

Improving the English in documents written on the computer:
Most small NGOs need to present documents in English. If they are written for other local NGOs then it is not important if the English is not accurate – or so you think. But we at Networklearning get emails and documents that we sometimes cannot understand! **Poor written English will handicap your work**. If you submit a project proposal to a big International NGO, and the English is unclear, you limit your chances. So what can you do?

'Spell check':
Many programs, like MS Word and Outlook, have an in-built 'spell check'. Use it before printing your document/sending your email!

⇒ How to use the spell checker in MS Word:
http://www.ehow.com/how_10075_spell-checker-microsoft.html
More info:
http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/lausd/resources/integration/Word/tools.html

⇒ If you are writing important emails, do this in a Word document, use the spell checker, then transfer the text to the email document.

⇒ Decide, as an NGO, whether you will use US English or UK English, and set that as your spell checker's default language.

⇒ In MS Word, you can also check and correct grammar:
http://ec.hku.hk/writing_turbocharger/proofing/grammarc.htm

Always, always use the spell checker!

Improving the written and spoken English of the NGO staff:
The only way to get people to speak and write better is to help them practice. Form a group to meet every week or two. You will need a class organiser to decide content, download materials etc. This could be a rotating job. Or you could look for a teacher who speaks English with a reasonable accent – one that English speakers from other cultures would understand. S/he would probably have to be paid.

⇒ Get hold of an English grammar book so people can practice the basics. Or use the internet: in Google, search for "English language exercises".

⇒ The English Forum (www.englishforum.com) offers an online community of people studying English as a Second Language; it has interactive exercises, dictionaries and even whole books. Or click on http://owl.english.purdue.edu and look for materials under English as a Second Language (ESL).

⇒ This site is also fun: http://www.paul-raedle.de/vtrain/lang-how.htm

It is important to encourage spoken as well as written skills, so get the class to listen to English-language radios, to watch videos, or sing songs.

Have exercises that encourage fluency – for example people can take turns in making short presentations on work topics, cooking recipes, car repairs etc. As

people improve they could make the kind of presentations they might make in a seminar with other NGOs.

People can be encouraged to read more in English. Perhaps the NGO can download and print a page or two of news every week to pass around the office.
- ⇒ To find a national newspaper online go to Google and type in "Newspapers" and the name of your county.
- ⇒ Or look here: http://www.abyznewslinks.com/

4 Improving your written communications

There are a few **basic programs** that will handle most of your 'creative' computer tasks:
- ⇒ a text editor (like MS Word) for preparing letters, reports and all kinds of text-based documents
- ⇒ a spreadsheet (like MS Excel) for managing projects and money
- ⇒ an email client (like MS Outlook) for emailing

Get to know how to use these well at these sites:

- ⇒ MS Word Tutorial: http://www.learnthat.com/courses/computer/word/
- ⇒ MS Excel Tutorial: http://www.learnthat.com/computers/learn-420-free_microsoft_excel_tutorial.htm
- ⇒ MS Outlook Tutorial: http://www.samspublishing.com/library/content.asp?b=STY_Windows_2000&seqNum=118

Basic **best practice** when creating documents is to:
- ⇒ Use templates. Spend time getting a 'master' document looking right. Then save it as a template and open a copy every time you want to make a similar document. This will save time and ensure consistency of presentation.
- ⇒ Use style sheets – a set of rules governing which typeface/size/colour is used for each level of information in the document. MS Word has various default ones but you can customise them to create a better, unique style sheet of your own. This will save time and ensure consistency of presentation.
- ⇒ Use sans serif fonts for better readability, especially on screen.
- ⇒ Don't shout: Use visual emphasis like colour or ALL CAPS sparingly. Do *not* use multiple exclamation marks!!!!
- ⇒ Don't crowd information: use 'white space', places on the paper where there is no text, to give the text 'room to breathe'

When it comes to the **actual writing**, say it plainly and simply (and 'spell check' it!):
- ⇒ For a mini training course on improving your communication skills with the use of plain language in written documents (including notes on design and testing): http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/plaintrain/digest.html
- ⇒ See our "Guidelines for Writing Reports" at www.networklearning.org/writing-reports.html
- ⇒ There is a Beginner's Guide to effective email: http://www.webfoot.com/advice/email.top.html#intro

Save the documents that you are going to send to other people as **PDFs** if you have this option – then they will be able to be opened *and* look the same on any other computer, regardless of settings, fonts and program used (via the free program Acrobat Reader).

When you send documents by **email**, whenever possible include them as separate attachments and not in the body of the email. If sending a big file or lots of files, compress first (using WinZip or similar utility).

⇒ Info on compressing files and folders: http://it-help.bathspa.ac.uk/fileman/file_copy.html#compression

5   Making your own hand-outs and booklets

Think it through first:
You want to distribute some specific information. For example you might want to make husbands more aware of malaria and the risks it presents to pregnant women and small children. So you want a leaflet that spells this out, that explains the role of impregnated nets, states the price and where to purchase them. People coming to your Clinic could take the leaflet home to their husbands.

Think about the best way of doing it. In most countries the national language has been put into a written form. But this does not mean that most people can read it. If a leaflet or manual arrives in a household, can the husband read it? If children read it out to their parents, would the contents be taken seriously? So think about other channels as well. You may be more effective using the spoken word through local radio or audio cassettes.

Non-Western scripts:
Your national language may have a script that is not European Standard. Examples are Hindi, Greek and Chinese. So if you want to make printed materials in that language you will have to get the computer and keyboard to work in that script. Try to get a second keyboard and screen for this.

⇒ More info at http://www.paul-raedle.de/vtrain/fonts.htm

Pulling the text together:
You need the text for your leaflet and you want to check your knowledge of the subject. Find resource materials that will supply it. You may find what you want in a textbook. Or you may go to a site like Networklearning because you have used it before. You find the "search" slot and put in the words "preventive" and "malaria". It tells you that there is a document "Principles and Practice of PHC" with a page on Malaria.

As an alternative you might go to the WHO site because it is the UN Health agency. If you do not know the address, you could go to Google and type in "WHO". Then, once in the website, you go to the "search" slot and put in "preventive" and "malaria". You get a long list of publications. Many of them look as if they are written for people

with a university education but there are also two pages on Malaria and Pregnancy that are useful.

Or you could instead just start at Google, using the same two words. You will get an even longer list of articles. Many will be written for people with university education, others will be written for Westerners. With some, you will not be able to judge the quality of the content because you do not know the author.

But by now you should have enough technical information to go ahead.

Writing and testing the text:
At this point, having revised your knowledge, sit with your colleagues and write the basic text. Keep the text simple and with only three key points.

When it is finished you may need to translate it into the local language. Then find someone to read the translated text and explain what it means. In other words, they translate it back. You do not want any confusion.

Illustrating the text:
You decide you have a reliable text and want your leaflet to have some drawings. So you go to Google. This time you click on the 'Images' tab and enter a single specific keyword: 'malaria'. You get a page of small 'thumbnail' images — photos, diagrams and drawings. Click on a good-looking one to see the actual image, which will, it is hoped, be a lot bigger. If it still looks useful you can download it to your computer. In Internet Explorer, you use the option 'Download image to disk'. Then you can print it. Some web images won't reproduce very well in print. You could get it adapted into a sketch by a local artist.

Designing the finished document:
Use your 'house style'/style sheets to set a consistent font and size of the various text elements – headings, subheads, body copy, lists, captions etc. If more variation is needed, create new styles based on existing ones. If you have access to desktop publishing (DTP) software learn how to use it, but it is not essential: MS Word and similar programs can also perform most DTP functions. But follow good design practice:
  ⇒ Ensure there is a clear hierarchy of information – that is, the subject is in the headline, the more important information is in the subheads, and the rest is in the body text.
  ⇒ Ensure readable body copy with sufficient 'white space' around it. Line lengths should average 10-14 words, no more.
  ⇒ For more, see DTP best practice and Design principals for booklets at http://desktoppub.about.com/od/courses/p/dtp_essentials.htm

Testing the leaflet in the community:
When you are happy with your leaflet, make some copies and go and test it. You want to test it with a group that is like your target group – perhaps you could talk to people in a local bar or garage (because you are writing for men). Show them a leaflet and ask them to explain what it says. Do not prompt them.

Planning the distribution:
You are asking husbands to spend money – a lot of money. In rural areas they may have spare cash (if any) after they have sold their harvest; and they plan their spending just before the harvest. This might be the best time to distribute the leaflets.

6   Making Your Computer a Community Resource

Build local contact:
Start to make contact with all the small NGOs in your town or district. Check out their mission, because you may not feel that you can work with them – perhaps they discriminate against certain groups; perhaps their money comes from illegal sources. Write these reasons down so that you can say "We only work with organisations that have the following characteristics."

Call the NGOs together to discuss how each can help each other. You could offer places in your language class and/or computer skills course.

Become a printing resource:
Find out whether the other NGOs have computers/printers. Your organisation can offer to make copies of manuals for a price. You may also be able to make printed materials for other NGOs.

Identify your printing costs: work out what it costs you to print one A4 page – the costs of ink, paper and depreciation of your machines. Decide what percentage you would add on, and what you could charge the other NGO to make a small profit.

Be an 'E-collaboration' centre:
International NGOs use various internet-based tools for efficient communication. You can too:
   ⇒ Skype is a program for making free calls over the internet to anyone else who also has Skype. It's free and easy to download and use, and works with most computers. It will save you a lot of money if you want to telephone to other countries See www.skype.com
   ⇒ MSN messenger – With Msn Messenger you can chat in real time with friends or colleagues through text messages, audio messages, or even video messages: http://messenger.msn.com/
   ⇒ D-groups – this is an online platform offering tools and services that bring individuals and organisations together in the international development community. "Whether you are trying to support a team, a group, a network, a partnership or a community, we hope to provide you with the capacity to do this in an environment which is simple, non-commercial, respectful of privacy, and targeted at low bandwidth users in the South": http://www.dgroups.org

7   Protecting your computer

Virus protection:

As soon as your computer has any contact with the outside world – which means the moment you are connected to the internet or you insert/attach an external disk – you are at risk of catching a virus. So make sure you have virus protection.

⇒ There are simple steps to defend against viruses at
www.sophos.com/virusinfo/bestpractice/

⇒ There are links to free and paid-for antivirus software at
www.firewallguide.com/anti-virus.htm

Email Spam:

Trash any 'junk mail' you receive – mass-mailed messages from people you don't know. Do not pass on any circulars about viruses, petitions or anything unless you are sure you can trust the source of the information and you check the information itself first.

⇒ Best practice for dealing with spam at
www.sophos.com/spaminfo/bestpractice/

Passwords:

Set up and use the computer's password system to protect sensitive information.

⇒ Online course on Sharing Workstations and Setting Passwords (specifically for Windows 2000 but relevant for other Windows versions):
http://www.samspublishing.com/library/content.asp?b=STY_Windows_2000&seqNum=127