

Talk to me... instantly

IF YOU'RE TIRED of having conversations via email, why not use Windows Messenger and communicate online in real-time, asks David Peterson

Instant messaging (IM) technology is fast becoming the next big thing in Internet communications. Indeed, with an estimated 75 million of the 120 million Web users last year being active instant messaging users, most of us already have Windows Messenger or MSN Messenger installed on our computers.

Instant messaging first gained popularity amongst home users as a quick, simple and effective means of communicating in real-time with friends and family, locating people with similar interests with whom to chat and exchange information, and tracking down former colleagues, classmates and long-lost relatives.

Over time, IM has also started to infiltrate the workplace. At first its use was largely unofficial, but recently, an increasing number of businesses have started to recognise its potential as part of their formal communications strategy. It has been predicted that within a couple of years IM may even surpass email as the primary means of Internet communication within businesses.

In upcoming instalments of Netsmarts we will be looking at how you can get the most out of instant messaging – both at home and in your business. For those of you who have yet to use instant messaging, we'll give you an idea of what you are missing out on.

To those unfamiliar with IM, the first question may be 'Why not just use email?' Fundamentally, IM is more immediate than an email. One thing email is commonly used for – but is arguably not very good at – is short messages that require a quick response and which, in turn, may generate a series of follow up questions. The immediacy of IM allows for a more conversational style of communication, meaning that an exchange that would have taken hours, or possibly days, by email can be resolved in minutes with IM.



In recent years, the original text interface to IM has been enhanced with voice- and video-conferencing facilities and other real-time collaboration features such as file sharing and multi-user chat. When combined with traditional collaboration tools such as email and discussion forums, the result is an excellent environment for the support of virtual communities or virtual work teams.

GETTING STARTED WITH WINDOWS MESSENGER

To download the latest version of Windows Messenger (it installs automatically as part of Windows XP), visit: www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/windowsmessenger/default.asp

To send an instant message with Windows Messenger:

- 1** Start Windows Messenger. (Double-click the Windows Messenger icon located in the status area on the right-hand side of your taskbar.)
- 2** Click on the link to sign in and then enter your .NET Passport email address and password. Click OK.
- 3** On your contacts list, double-click the name of the person you want to contact.

4 Type your message in the lower part of the window.

5 Click Send or press ENTER to send your message. Your message will appear in the top window.

6 Your contact will receive a pop-up box in the lower right corner of their screen, and an audible alert indicates a message from you. Clicking on the pop-up box will open their Conversation window.

In the status bar at the bottom of the Conversation window, you can see when your contact is typing, as well as the date and time of the last message you received.

You cannot initiate an instant message conversation with more than one person; you can only add people to a conversation once the message window is open.

A maximum of five people can take part in a conversation, including yourself.

ADDING PEOPLE AND CONTACTS

Adding people to a conversation is quite simple:

- 1** In the Conversation window, click Invite Someone to this Conversation.
- 2** Click the contact's name and OK.

To send an instant message to someone not on your contacts list:

- 1** Click the Send button, and then click Other.
- 2** Type the person's Passport address (for example, an email address consisting of a user name and ending in @hotmail.com, @passport.com, or @msn.com).

The person to whom you send the instant message must have Windows Messenger installed.

If an instant message cannot be delivered, make sure your contact can accept outside messages.

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