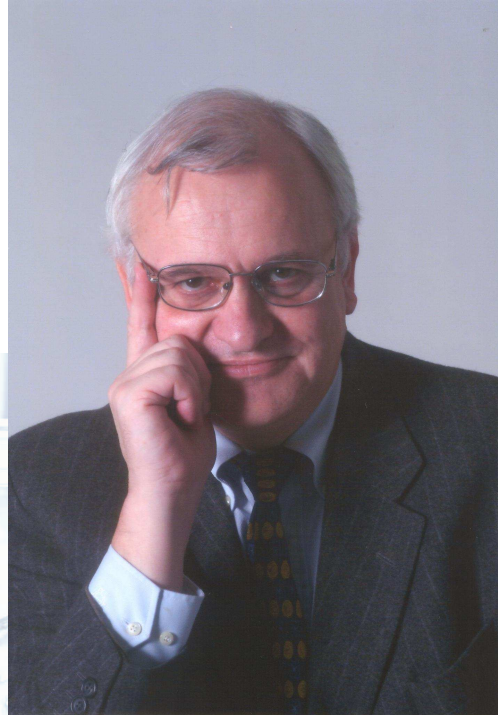


WHAT IS A VIRTUAL PRIVATE NETWORK?

The widespread adoption of broadband over the past few years has seen a corresponding increase in 'Virtual Private Networks' or VPNs. A VPN allows a business with two or more sites, no matter where they are, to link them over the internet. They appear to be on a single network, even though the sites are not directly connected. Hence "Virtual" network. And they are "Private" because all the information transmitted within a VPN is encrypted and can only be read by another member of the VPN. With a VPN all users can share files, software and printers as if they were in the same office.



WHY DO I WANT ONE?

Even if business operates from a number of sites, everyone usually needs to be able to work with the same basic data, irrespective of where it is actually held. For example, the warehouse may need to update stock records for accounts, who are elsewhere, while sales may want to print picking lists and dispatch notes in a warehouse two counties away. And for staff working at home, a VPN can allow partial or full access to documents, systems and data.

THERE ARE LIMITATIONS

The main problem with such networks concerns the speed of connection. While high-speed ADSL (broadband) connections are now widely available, the headline speed quoted only applies to data downloaded *from* the internet. Transmitting information *to* the internet is still relatively slow and a uniform 256Kb. For general internet browsing this is not a great issue, however when used for a VPN it can be. Every time information is transferred between sites one upload and one download are involved and hence the speed is limited to 256Kb. Over the next few months faster links, including upload speeds increased by two or three times, are starting to become available.

This speed limitation can be a problem, particularly with some small business accounting packages, but fortunately there are ways the system can be set up to deal with these limitations.

POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS

The VPN is one example of the way in which changes in technology are fundamentally altering the way in which businesses can be run. Over the next few years we will no doubt see many more. In the meantime, consider this; could you resolve some of your business issues with a VPN?

This article was originally published in the Newbury Weekly News Business Review in September 2006.

Charles Zealey is a consultant working with business professionals helping them to improve their organisation's productivity and effectiveness with the use of Information Technology. Typically a return

on investment can be achieved with 6-12 months. To access help sheets go to www.itsolve.co.uk/HelpSheets/. For a free half-hour consultation on business IT issues phone 01635 869863 or email lisa@itsolve.co.uk.

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