

Support for Laptops and Self Managed Machines

Proposed Meeting to Discuss Improvements to the Support Given

An 'I' meeting (formerly called an Innovation meeting) will be called shortly to discuss the issue of mobile computing and self-managed machines in general. At this meeting there will be the opportunity to discuss all aspects of support for using laptops. It is hoped that at the meeting it will be possible to agree a roadmap for future development of the support services. Agreed changes to the support services will then be set in train once the resources for developing and implementing them become available.

Background

Most effort from the computing staff has until now been focussed on providing support for teaching and research through the managed commodity DICE desktop, the services that they use (such as file servers, mail, web, printing) and the infrastructure that underpins all of that (such as system configuration, authentication, authorisation, networking). The administrative staff use the managed Windows desktop provided by Information Services in place of the DICE managed desktop. More specialised support for research and teaching is provided by a dedicated unit of the computing staff, the Research and Teaching Unit. The computing staff currently manage over 1000 Linux desktop machines and servers and this is only possible because they use a state of the art system configuration technology, LCFG, for managing them.

The computing staff recognise that an increasing number of staff use laptops and/or manage their own desktop machine. Providing support for such use however raises some serious and difficult problems for the computing staff and affects what level and volume of support is possible:

- In contrast to the situation with managed desktops where solving a problem can potentially help hundreds of people, solving a problem that is to do with a single self-managed machine is unlikely to help more than the user of the self-managed machine;
- It is often not possible for computing staff to even have access to the same hardware and operating system, let alone familiarity with the laptop model and operating system release being used, so help in such cases would be limited to fairly generic issues that are not specific to the model/operating system version of the machine.

Current Limit to Support

In view of such difficulties in providing support to users of self-managed machines and laptops, in order to make most effective use of the limited support effort that we have available, the default level of support that we can currently realistically provide to users of self-managed machines and laptops is fairly limited:

- we will spend a limited amount of time helping to debug any problems experienced by individual users of self-managed machines;
- we will only be able to provide support for solving very generic types of problem if a problem is being experienced on hardware which the support staff do not have normal access to – issues of support should be discussed with the User Support Unit prior to purchase;
- we will do what we can to provide pointers to other sources and documents that may assist the user to solve the problem experienced. At present we have not had the resources to assemble much in the way of local documentation to support users of self-managed machines but we plan to eventually do much more (better documentation, a forum for sharing problems & advice, backups) once we gain some economy of scale on moving into the Informatics Forum;

- we will endeavour to make all our own services accessible from machines running recent releases of operating systems and will provide the necessary information to users about the addresses, protocols and ports to use to access them.

Exceptions to this default will apply to:

- administrative staff who need to use a laptop (the vast majority of administrative and secretarial staff however will use a managed desktop)
- laptops that are used by outreach staff for running demonstrations
- situations in which a clear business case justifies a different level of support