

I bought my parents a computer for Christmas a couple of years ago. When you do that, you know you are also offering them free access to a 24/7 helpline, but I'm getting fewer calls now than I did initially. If you think computers have actually become easy to use, buy your parents one.

I was round there the other day, fixing something or other, and asked my father what he wanted from his computer; I got back a simple list, which I've annotated:

- *not have to boot it up* - to be able to simply turn it on and it work, or to be able to leave it on
- *not have it crash* - need I say more?
- *be able to find stuff again* - photos should go in one place, documents in another - and with file dialogue boxes that have so many icons, fields and lists in them you don't know where to start, it's no wonder he's confused. There are desktop icons that flick from window to window as you drill down looking for stuff, and this is supposed to do the same thing as Windows Explorer which has those funny trees where you can click on the left panel or the right one...He simply saves them wherever the system suggests and gets me to find them some time later
- *understand when to double-click and when not to*. You try remembering which is which when describing how to set something up over the phone from the top of a hill in Wales. You end up suggesting that he click once, and if nothing happens he double-clicks. And that's after weeks of training him on the speed for a double-click.
- *to send and receive emails easily*. Sometimes he's connected to the internet, sometimes he's not. Sometimes the system auto-disconnects (if he's first used Outlook Express and that dialled the connection) and sometimes it doesn't (if he used Internet Explorer first).
- *to write letters*. Success here - for him. For my mother, she wants to move the cursor with the mouse to where she wants the text to be, and then type. On a blank page, that's not possible.
- *to edit photos, print out four or six a page, view them on screen*. Oh, a world of pain and different applications tried and discarded; I'm not even going to go there.
- *to browse the internet unharrassed*. Browsing the net is the easy part - single clicks, for a start. But the pop-ups and adverts and offers and instructions have turned the information superhighway into a dinghy backstreet of grubby hustling and pimping.

He's not alone. There are many users like him - most, I expect. He has fairly simple requirements for his computer - and yet he's failed by the system in pretty much all departments. A little trial and error, a little guesswork, and he gets on handsomely with everything, but it leaves a nagging background worry; constant reminders of how he's not mastered the machine.

I therefore think that we've failed him. Sure, Microsoft have failed him too, but we are people championing usability. We shouldn't preach to the converted, for there are vast tracts of computing continent that need to see the light and receive enlightenment. What are we doing? Have we moved on to look at esoteric aspects of interaction design; are we devising complex theories of human interaction. Yes. Is this useful? Yes. But we mustn't forget the roots. It's not as if they want much - all the requirements seem to me to be very reasonable, and should be easily achievable. For example, I don't understand why a computer takes so long to boot up. For goodness sake, if I set the alarm on my phone and turn the phone off, it still beeps in my ear at ungodly hours to wake me and then asks if it should be switched on for calls. But in the past years, those problems still remain and people are still struggling with them. Maybe it's time for us to solve the basic simple issues that most affect people, before we start tinkering with the more advanced ones. Perhaps then people would listen more to what we have to say, and take us a whole lot more seriously.