

Clear COMMunICaTions

From those friendly people at **DOT-COMmunications**
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Clear COMMunICaTions is a regular column offering I.T. advice & support. If you have an I.T.-related problem that would also benefit others, please send an email to the address shown below, & we'll do our best to answer your questions.

Q. I have heard that it's important to have plenty of RAM. Does it matter what operating system you have?

A. RAM, or Random Access Memory, is the memory that programs reside in while running. While it is true that if your system is deficient on RAM, it will run slower than it has to. A Windows XP machine using standard consumer applications, a simple anti-virus software (rather than the often over-bloated security suites), and is free of malware and unnecessary programs that load at start up, will run extremely well on 512Mb of RAM.

Windows Vista 32-Bit operating system prefers 2 to 3Gb of RAM, and Vista 64 Bit runs well with 4Gb. The RAM size for Windows 7 are the same as for Vista.

More is typically overkill for a well running system. The only reason for more memory is if you play games on your computer or you MUST have a number of programs running simultaneously. Some people who have mismanaged memory use and/or a malware infection can get a temporary reprieve by adding extra RAM.

if you are using a 32-bit operating system you are limited to 4GB of memory anyway and you can't access it all. in essence, you only have access to 3.25Gb. 64-bit operating systems can access more memory, but are usually limited (by design) to 256Gb.

The reason for having the optimal amount of RAM is that the system will work better because it can keep the Operating System and loaded programs running in memory rather than swopping them out to (slower) disk, or "Virtual Memory" as they call it.

There are a number of other things that can be done to streamline system performance instead of adding more memory. Contacting a reputable computer professional to perform maintenance on an annual basis should be an important consideration. Eliminating anything that isn't needed regularly from the start up menu and regularly running anti-virus and anti-spyware would also help.

Q. We store all our client data on an excel spreadsheet rather than in a database. Do we need to register with Information Commissioner or any other body?

A. Under the Data Protection Act a spreadsheet is the same as a database - its all classed as electronic data.

The Data Protection Act only applies to "personal data", however, you may hold other information which is not classed as personal data but which nevertheless needs to be looked after carefully because it is confidential or important.

In order to be "personal", information must relate to an identifiable, living individual. The Court of Appeal in December 2003 decided that it must also be *about* them in some way, i.e. you can work out who they are from the data.

Some voluntary organisations don't have to register, however Registration with the Information Commissioner only costs £35 for not-for-profit organisations.

The key thing, in any case, is that you must comply with the eight Data Protection Principles (which are part of the law, not just a set of recommendations). In this case, making sure that people know what information is being stored about them, giving them the choice of whether to be included or not and putting appropriate security in place to ensure the data remains safe.

For further information and a guide to the Data Protection Act go to <http://preview.tinyurl.com/ye3pdbh> (PDF Format, 208kb)

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For more information & a free consultation,
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