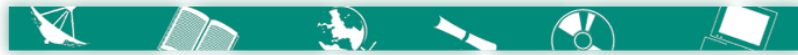


M·E·R·L·I·N



Manitoba • Education • Research • Learning • Information • Networks

SPRING
2007
NEWSLETTER



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Connect
Professional
Pilot Project

Connecting in the
Global Village

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MERLIN is a special
operating agency with
the Department of
Science, Technology,
Energy and Mines

MESSAGE FROM ACTING CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

Welcome back from Spring Break!

Typically in the last quarter of the school year we're all trying to fit many demands into our busy schedules. MERLIN is no different as we undertake new projects and complete old ones.

The MERLIN Partner Program continues to be a major focus. 91% of the FTEs in the province have joined the program and we expect that number to increase in Year 2. We have conducted four 'Partner' meetings since the inception of the Program. These have produced positive results as school division representatives review and make decisions on issues related to the makeup of the program. In our first year, we've included additional services in to the Partner Program at no cost to divisions through incorporation of desktop anti-virus and the opportunity for divisions to access government rates for wireless and long distance. Also, in response to requests from Partner divisions, MERLIN has proposed a pilot bulk hardware purchasing solution to run from May 1 to September 30.

Some of the other activities we are currently working on include a pilot project for a student portfolio application (ePearl) on behalf of the Department of Education, Citizenship, and Youth and a Connect Professional (Macromedia Breeze) video conference pilot. We have also invited interested divisions to participate in a Computer Security Day for students supported by the Information Protection Association of Manitoba

(IPAM) and are partnering with Green Manitoba to find an interim solution for the disposal of electronic waste.

We've also dedicated a significant amount of staff time and resources working 'behind the scenes'. A few activities include working with stakeholders in seeking solutions to school connectivity. We're making progress on behalf of a number of divisions. The Agency has also researched and created an enterprise-level custom spam filtering solution to counter the massive increase in world-wide spam. Maintaining adequate solutions requires ongoing research, technical adjustments and expertise.

We're trying to remain knowledgeable about your technology requirements through staff participation in a number of educational organizations. Collaboration with a number of stakeholders including your input provide MERLIN with opportunities for improvement and change. We look forward to continuing this relationship.

MERLIN staff have enjoyed working with all of you this past year!

Regards,

Cathy Garrett,
Acting COO

RIDING THE WAVE OF CHANGE 2007

May 24 and 25, 2007

For more information contact **Lloyd Roche** at lroche@esd.mb.ca

Why am I not getting all of my email?

SOME REASONS FOR EMAIL BLOCKING:

Country of Origin

Some foreign countries generate the largest numbers of spam and are subject to blocking. If you suspect we are blocking your legitimate incoming mail from overseas, please provide us with the email address and/or IP that the email is coming from. We can then remove them from blocking.

Source of Email Message

Some North American ISP's have high contents of spam as well. We whitelist their email servers as well as any business addresses that include an IP reverse that indicates that they are something other than a residential cable modem. All of their other IPs are blocked by default unless we see that legit email comes from them. This is the only/best way we can protect our clients from such ISPs until they clean up their IP space.

External Blocking

Our system receives updates from external sources that block known spammers (e.g. spamhaus)

REASONS FOR QUARANTINE OF EMAIL:

The mail filtering system quarantines email for a variety of reasons, some of which include:

Content

MERLIN quarantines unrecognized/suspect URL's contained in the body of email. Mail is checked on a regular basis for legitimate messages that can be released to our clients.

Message Contents

Some messages may be quarantined because of content (or lack thereof), even though they are legitimate, some of which include (often in combinations):

- ▶ message body is 25-50% uppercase
- ▶ subject talks about losing pounds
- ▶ HTML has a low ratio of text to image area
- ▶ message includes a link to a likely spammer email
- ▶ missing Subject
- ▶ From: does not include a real name

THE 'SPAM TSUNAMI' – A FOLLOW UP

We received a good deal of feedback on our Fall 2006 Newsletter article on the "Spam Tsunami" and we thought you would be interested in an update on this ever-growing problem.

The following is an updated version of the chart we published in the last newsletter. All of the email and spam volumes have been adjusted to be a relative multiple of our June 2006 volumes. So for example, in March 2007, we received 4 times the amount of legitimate email that we received in June 2006 while, at the same time, spam volume increased by a factor of 13. Also, you will notice that some of the spammers took a vacation at Christmas time and returned to "work" later in January.

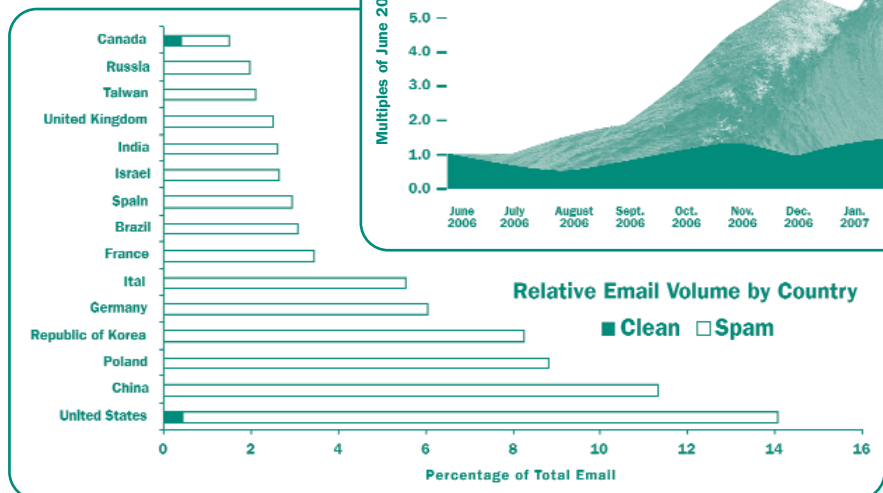
Spam continues to come to our inboxes from all over the globe. The following chart shows the top 12 countries from which we receive email. These 12 countries account for 75% of our email. 193 additional countries account for the remaining 25%.

Most of the growth in legitimate email volume has been due to the additions of new email domains to our filtering service. MERLIN Partner Program members receive this filtering service as a part of their annual subscription and our service now filters email for over 50 different domains. MERLIN also does email filtering for some of the post-secondary institutions in Manitoba.

MERLIN has recently introduced a new production filtering service to handle the ever-increasing volume of mail. Most email domains have been migrated over to the new service during the month of March.

Some of the features of this new service include:

- ▶ **Greylisting** – a technique that won't block legitimate mail servers but is quite effective at stopping some spammers, particularly "botnets". The only impact is a slight 5 minute delay the first time you receive email from someone. Once you have successfully received email from someone, greylisting will always allow their email through. (See greylisting.org for more information)
- ▶ **Enhanced HELO checking** – a simple technique that helps ensure that email is sent from a properly configured mail server and not a virus infected PC.
- ▶ **Enhanced RBL checking** – some major improvements in the way we use industry standard blocklists to ensure that we rarely block legitimate email. This technique allows us to "exclude" known, trusted email servers (for example school division mail servers) from being blocked by these global lists.
- ▶ **Custom RBL** – filtering email for over 50 domains has given us the ability to identify over 155M internet addresses that consistently send us spam. This blocklist is maintained in such a way as to be a very low risk for blocking legitimate email.
- ▶ **Local Administration** – interested school divisions have the option of reviewing their own quarantined email and monitoring the performance of the filtering service.



PARTNER PROGRAM UPDATES

Status

31 out of 37 school divisions are now participating in the Partner Program. This represents 91% of the full time equivalent teachers (FTEs) in the province. Participating school divisions have signed a 3-year agreement that includes many services they may already have been purchasing on an individual basis.

Long Distance Rates

Manitoba government has entered into a new two-year agreement with MTS Allstream Inc. for long distance services. School divisions participating in the Partner Program have the option of obtaining these long distance services at government rates. Please contact info@merlin.mb.ca to indicate your interest or to obtain a username and password required for the .pdf downloads.

Update Meetings / Information Sessions

Several update/information meetings with school divisions participating in the program have taken place since our fall newsletter:

- ▶ **October 19th, 2006** – Overview of the benefits of the program as well as the addition of Microsoft One Note and desktop antivirus software (Panda Software) to the Partner Program at no additional cost.
- ▶ **November 30th, 2006** – A follow-up to the Oct 19th meeting. A survey was sent out to seek feedback on interest in software products/programs that could subsequently be added to the Program. The results of the survey were discussed.
- ▶ **January 25th, 2007** – An assessment of interest by Partner divisions in bulk hardware purchases. Discussions on the type, quantity and timelines for acquisition of hardware will assist MERLIN in determining if it's feasible to move forward on behalf of multiple school divisions.
- ▶ **March 22nd, 2007** – The results of MERLIN's research on potential additional programs. This meeting also explained the Software Assurance Benefits. Additionally, MERLIN proposed a Bulk Hardware Purchasing (BHP) Program.

CONNECTIVITY UPDATES

School divisions in the Westman area have direct connectivity to MERLIN through the MRnet link at Brandon University. This allows school divisions to take full advantage of the MERLIN Partner Program services. So far all of Brandon School Division and one school in Beautiful Plains School Division are connected directly to MERLIN through Westman Communications Group.

School divisions who are interested in connecting to MERLIN in that area are encouraged to talk to their Internet service provider.

TESTIMONIAL

"I want to thank MERLIN once again for all the assistance with innovative ideas in helping us to reduce our costs and processes. I think it's really great all you're doing in helping school divisions. This partnership is truly growing beyond our expectations."

– Fran King, Purchasing Manager, Sunrise School Division

Proposed Bulk Hardware Pilot Project (BHP)

MERLIN has proposed the creation of a Bulk Hardware Pilot Project to run from May 1st to Sept 30th of this year. A committee was formed from 6 voluntary representatives from various school divisions. This will provide school divisions with the opportunity to test how bulk purchasing will fit in comparison to their existing purchasing processes as well as assess overall benefits of this initiative. Potential benefits:

- 1 Simplified purchasing process
- 2 Consistent pricing (based on combined purchasing power of school divisions and government)
- 3 Purchasing freedom (elimination of need to purchase in quantity)
- 4 Affordable access to Tier 1 hardware and more consistent hardware configurations regardless of division size, volume and purchasing cycle.

Once created, the Partner Program Product List will be posted on MERLIN's website (password protected). For more information on this pilot program, please contact **John Hiebert** or email info@merlin.mb.ca.

MICROSOFT SOFTWARE ASSURANCE E-LEARNING BENEFIT

As part of the MPP, Partner school divisions have access to MICROSOFT SOFTWARE ASSURANCE E-LEARNING BENEFITS at no cost. Courses are accessed through the web and include Server, Application (Office) and System (Windows) products. For more information, please contact licensing@merlin.mb.ca.

CONTENT FILTERING

MERLIN has installed and is currently testing a new web based enterprise reporter that will generate up-to-date statistics for content filtering clients. Clients who are interested in Beta testing the reporter can contact **Darrell Finimore** or email info@merlin.mb.ca.

CONNECT PROFESSIONAL PILOT PROJECT

(formerly called Macromedia Breeze)

MERLIN and ADOBE have partnered to provide school divisions with an opportunity to participate in a Pilot Project with Connect Professional from **January 15th to June 30th, 2007**

What can Connect Professional do?

- ▶ Create meeting rooms which are always available
- ▶ Provide multipoint video conferencing
- ▶ Allow application sharing
- ▶ Allow desktop sharing (with remote control)
- ▶ Manage attendees
- ▶ Provide Internet audio conferencing within the meeting
- ▶ Allow file sharing
- ▶ Provide Meeting Recording (recorded meetings can be viewed at any time)
- ▶ Customize meeting room layouts
- ▶ Create meeting templates
- ▶ Provide the ability to have moderated Q & A sessions
- ▶ Allow multiple presenters
- ▶ Control participant permissions (attendee, presenter, meeting host)
- ▶ Allow Polling (can create multiple Polls to get feedback from participants)
- ▶ Provide white board and annotation tools

What are the benefits?

- ▶ Provides the ability to interact over distances (meetings and presentations can be conducted with multiple locations reducing time and travel costs)
- ▶ One school division is currently piloting Connect Professional to test the following potential benefits:
 - Supports small group just-in-time virtual professional development
 - Supports learning communities initiatives by allowing teachers to meet virtually
 - Allows for posting and organization of professional development materials
 - Allows classes from different locations to work together virtually
 - Allows teachers of online courses to have a "face-to-face" link with students. Activity that would take a number of emails over several days can be accomplished in one short Connect Professional meeting.

What are the costs?

- ▶ There are no costs for participating in the Pilot Project

If your school division is interested in participating in this Pilot Project, please email info@merlin.mb.ca.

CONNECTING IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

If you're looking for an opportunity for professional development as well as the latest research and information on distance education and technology, this conference is for you...

The **CADE/AMTEC/MADLaT international conference** will be held at the Delta Hotel in Winnipeg **May 12 – 16**. The conference offers a choice of 20 preconference workshops on Saturday and Sunday May 12 & 13 and over 110 sessions at the conference (May 14 – 16) with a variety of speakers & topics.

Keynote speakers include:

Derrick de Kerckhove, Director of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology and a professor in the Department of French at the University of Toronto.

Ellen Wagner is the Senior Director of Worldwide eLearning Solutions with Adobe Systems.

Hervé Fischer, artist-philosopher, and founder and president of the International Federation of Multimedia Associations.

For more information or to register, visit the conference website at: www.cade-aced.ca/conferences/2007/

Thanks to MERLIN's Advisory Board

MERLIN would like to acknowledge and thank its Advisory Board for their dedication and service over the past three years. In June, 2006, the Board graciously agreed to the extension of their terms for an additional year. At that time, the Agency was awaiting the final decision of school divisions on inclusion in the Partner Program. In addition, the Advisory Board had just concluded several meetings as the K-12 representatives to the Education Sector Working Committee on school connectivity. The Board had contributed advice and recommendations on both these initiatives.

We have appreciated the participation and contribution of the following Board members:

- ▶ Don Reece, *Pembina Trails SD (Chair)*
– PEMBINA TRAILS SCHOOL DIVISIONS
- ▶ Craig Cuddy, *CECM West Representative* – PRAIRIE SPIRIT SCHOOL DIVISION
- ▶ Sam Steindel, *Department of Education, CITIZENSHIP AND YOUTH REPRESENTATIVE, DLITU*
- ▶ Darlene Dufily, *Rural Representative, SUPERINTENDENT, INTERLAKE SCHOOL DIVISION*
- ▶ Rob Carnegie, *CECM Central Representative, ST. JAMES ASSINIBOIA SCHOOL DIVISION*
- ▶ Cameron Mateika, *Northern Representative, SWAN VALLEY SCHOOL DIVISION*
- ▶ Gerry Miller, *Post Secondary Representative, UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA*
- ▶ Gilbert Michaud, *Department of Education, CITIZENSHIP AND YOUTH REPRESENTATIVE, BEF*
- ▶ Howard Burston, *First Nations Representative, MFNERC*
- ▶ Phil Taylor, *ManACE Representative, ST. JOHN'S-RAVENSCOURT SCHOOL*

The Minister of Science, Technology, Energy and Mines will be appointing a new Advisory Board in the fall.

**CECM
-AGM**

The Computer Education Coordinators – Annual General Meeting will be held June 7 & 8 at the Elkhorn Conference Center near Clear lake. For more information contact **Craig Cuddy** at ccuddy@mts.net.