



Instant messaging — the new way to chat

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Ever try to have an e-mail conversation? It works something like this: You and a friend are both online. You send an e-mail, then wait patiently (or impatiently) while watching your inbox for the response, and so on.

There is an easier way — it's called instant messaging (IM). Several popular internet services provide free instant messaging, including AOL, MSN and Yahoo, and you don't need to be a subscriber to get them for free.

The instant messaging services work by opening a chat window on your desktop allowing you and a friend (or friends) to have a virtual conversation.

Instant messaging offers a variety of obvious advantages.

- It's free.
- It's fast — actually, it's instant. You can get quick questions/answers without walking to another person's office or having to call them (in our office, we use IM almost exclusively for communication).
- It's attention-getting — the IM pops up on your screen over the rest of your work (or flashes in your tray).
- It's efficient — you can talk to more than one person at a time.

To get started, choose which service you want to install (AOL, MSN or another). You might want to base the decision on what service your friends and family use, since you'll all need to be using the same service to chat.

Then, visit the site and look for the "messenger" button. Follow the instructions to register, choose a screen name and download the program.

As with most free software, use some caution. The services come with a variety of added features and advertising that can be truly annoying. Fortunately, most can be waived or turned off.

Once you've installed the program and opened your message window, you'll want to set up your buddy list by adding the screen names of your business colleagues, friends and family.

You're all set! To be truly cool, you might want to learn some of the common text messaging shorthand, such as BRB (be right back), BTW (by the way) and LOL (laugh out loud).

Also, you'll want to be aware of proper "netiquette," such as not typing in all caps (considered shouting). Check out www.netlingo.com for help.

A new feature available with instant messaging is the ability to message with voice instead of simply text.

It works the same as text-based instant messaging, except that users speak instead of type.

In other words, you can have a voice conversation with someone over the internet using instant messenger. Think about it, you can eliminate long distance calls to everyone in your buddy list — even those living in different countries!

Each of the services mentioned here offer voice. Or for a more sophisticated version, try Skype (www.skype.com). The free version of Skype can be used to contact any other Skype user, anywhere in the world for free.

For a small fee, Skype can connect the user to a regular telephone anywhere in the world.

For more information, e-mail clickandhack@friscocomputerstore.com.

[BACK](#) 