

You have probably heard of it – you may even have surfed on it. One thing is certain, you can no longer ignore it. The Internet is rapidly intruding into everyday life. Originally developed by the US military and popularised by academics, the Internet – a worldwide network of computer databases linked by high-speed communications – is becoming a hot-bed of commerce.

Construction professionals may think surfing the net or riding the system irrelevant to the design and construction of buildings. But, as firms in the US are starting to discover, the phenomenal communications power of the Internet can have real benefits. It allows access in seconds to information that, previously, would have taken weeks to locate. And response times are just as quick.

Likewise, placing your own page on the net – in other words, creating a database for other net users to tap into – is a powerful method of advertising worldwide. It costs little and is accessible to a rapidly growing band of 30 million users.

Overleaf, Building begins a two-monthly series of visits to Internet sites of interest with a look at a Canadian construction-oriented site. Here, Graham Ridout talks to some of the companies using the site and James Macneil gives a brief outline of how to get on to the net.

# NET

## profits

ONE ENTRY THAT STANDS OUT ON the American-compiled AEC Infonet pages is the one for construction lawyer J Norman Stark – it features his photograph. "For me, the best thing about it is it's good for my vanity," he chuckles.

Stark, from Cleveland, Ohio, has been on the web for "a couple of months" and says he's had "a few contracts – some serious, but no clients as such". All these contracts have been via e-mail and Stark says none of the messages could be described as "intrusive".

He says he spends about half an hour each day checking his e-mail and "surfing" on the Internet.

But he envisages upping the time he spends on the net because he wants to compile a newsletter on the latest legal rulings in the USA. "I see there's a need for publishing a newsletter, which would probably be upgraded every week as new cases come out."

It costs Stark \$40-50 (£26-33) each month to subscribe to the AEC Infonet. He considers it money well spent and

"absolutely" has no intention of quitting the net.

Stark qualified in 1958 after his degree studies were interrupted by military service for the Korean war. Apart from trying to win new business, Stark philosophises: "If I have some capability after spending over 30 years [in the industry], it is incumbent on me to spread that experience."

**Construction lawyer J Norman Stark uses his page on the Internet to invite potential customers to ask him about their rights under the law.**

QUALIGLASS WINDOWS HAS BEEN subscribing to the AEC Infonet for two to three months because, says chief estimator Kim Murray, "we are trying to expand our market area".

So far, the Edmonton, Alberta, window manufacturer and installer has had "no feedback" from its entry. Murray says Qualiglass is prepared to be patient: "The Internet is still in its infancy and, at present, there are not many construction companies on it. But as more companies join, it will become better because more people will know where to look for the information."

The bulk of Qualiglass's turnover of Canadian \$4m (£2m) comes from contracts near its home base. However, Murray says the firm has worked in Japan

and China as well as tendered for jobs in Pakistan and the Middle East.

He adds: "Basically, we want to expand into other areas – not just in North America but also further afield." He explains that one reason for testing out the Internet was to find new openings because sales have been down because of the recession.

DEB LAASKO, PRESIDENT OF A/E Employment, is no stranger to electronic databases. Since her company was set up two years ago, Laasko has used on-line services to help find jobs for the 300 or so architects and engineers the agency has on its register.

The two major services she uses are the bulletin board prepared by the American

Institute of Architects and a service offered by America On-line.

A/E Employment logged into the AEC Infonet three months ago because "it was free for the first 25 people who joined".

Laasko is candid about the number of enquiries received: "That's an easy one to answer – zero." She is equally candid about her intentions to continue: "I'll stay as long as it's free. I'll only pay to subscribe once it is up and running with far more people on it and using it than there are now."

That said, Laasko admits to spending at least one-and-a-half to two hours each week on the net – "mainly using it for research to find different places to market our firm. And AEC is a good place to find that info."

### GETTING CONNECTED

TECHNOPHOBES WHO TIRE OF hearing on-line acquaintances talking about their latest travels on the information superhighway need not despair. Connecting to the web is not as difficult as it seems.

Individuals and firms who want to search the web for information of interest need two pieces of basic hardware – a personal computer and a modem. The PC should be able to run Windows; a 386 will do if you are patient, but the faster the computer, the better. The same applies to the modem – the more information it can send and receive every second, the better. Most Macintosh computers are also capable of Internet access.

Once the hardware is in place, your next step is to organise a connection into the web. For this, you need to subscribe to a network provider – organisations that act as entry points to the web. Network providers each have a central hub computer – often called a 'server' – that acts as an interface between their subscribers and the web. Each subscriber has a phone link to the hub which it can dial at will and use to access other computers on the network beyond.

The network provider also acts as a postman. When subscribers join the network, they are allocated an e-mail number. Any electronic messages sent to the subscriber are directed through the hub, which uses the number to identify the subscriber and redirect the messages to them.

Companies wanting to set up a web site – a permanent address where they can

place information for other web users to access – have a number of options. The most obvious is to set up a computer with an ISDN connection linking it directly with the web. The computer holds the computerised data web page in its memory, and needs the high-speed ISDN telephone link to allow this information to be transmitted to other web users who contact it. When the phone link is connected, it will be allocated a web address that complies with international protocols, in a way similar to how telephone numbers are allocated.

If setting up a dedicated computer and phone line is too expensive, companies can pay to have their page placed on a server supplied by an outside organisation. There are several such web sites in North America on which companies can pay to place advertisements linked directly to an index on the home page – the first page web users see when they dial into a site.

As a third option, some network providers allow subscribers to place their own pages on the network central server as part of the subscription fee.

When deciding which network provider to subscribe to, you need to decide the level of service you want. Also, apart from price, the location of the network provider is important. Ensure you can contact them with a local call. The market for network providers is competitive and prices are constantly changing, so it's worth checking for special offers. Charging methods for web connections vary greatly.

**Example prices (excluding VAT) of popular network providers:**

**Demon**  
One-off start-up fee: £12.50  
Monthly rate: £10  
Contact: 0181-371 1234

**Easynet**  
Scheme A: One-off start-up fee plus two months' subscription £48.80  
Scheme B: One-off start-up fee plus one year's subscription £143.80  
After this:  
Monthly rate: £11.90  
Yearly rate: £143.80  
Contact: 0171-209 0990

**Cityscape**  
One-off start-up fee: £50  
Monthly rate: £15  
Contact: 01223-566950

**Atlas**  
One-off start-up fee: £25  
Quarterly rate: £36  
Yearly rate: £144  
Contact: 0171-312 0400

**BBC Networking club**  
One-off start-up fee: £25  
Monthly rate: £12  
Contact: 0181-576 7799

**CompuServ**  
Monthly rate: £6.50 (includes three free hours of access)  
Additional hourly rate: £1.70  
Contact: 0800-289378