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Instant Messenger (IM) The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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Instant Messaging (IM) is a fast and easy method of communicating to another individual while online in real time. According to Computer and Internet Dictionary 3rd edition, real time is defined as **immediate response by a computer system**. One of the biggest advantages of Instant Messenger programs (besides the fact that they are freeware, **which means it's free**) is that they allow users the ability to chat with someone as if you were sitting right next to them, having an actual conversation, but instead of speaking, you are typing. All that is needed to utilize this tool is a computer with Internet connection and an Instant Messenger program. Some of the most popular programs include AOL Instant Messenger at <http://www.aol.com/aim/about.html> ICQ Instant Messenger available at <http://web.icq.com> Yahoo Messenger located at <http://messenger.yahoo.com> and MSN Messenger at <http://messenger.msn.com>.

To communicate with friends, family members and/or co-workers, you need to know your friends, family members' and/or co-workers buddy/user names. The buddy/user names can be stored in the program and are referred to as a **buddy/contact list**. Lastly, both parties need to have the same Instant Messenger program such as AOL Instant Messenger, MSN Messenger etc. to communicate.

Unfortunately, at the moment, none of the programs mentioned are compatible with each other. To illustrate, in the event someone you know is using AOL Instant Messenger and you are using MSN Messenger one of you has to download and install whatever the other person is using so the two of you can communicate. There are, however, a few programs available that integrate the different IM programs into one interface. Currently, one of the most stable and versatile on the market is Trillian, available at <http://www.trillian.cc>.

Besides being able to see if one of your buddies/contacts is online, Instant Messenger programs also allow users to send each other text messages, photos, pictures and word document files in real-time. In addition, some Instant Messenger programs have voice and Web cam features to enhance one's experience while online. Most IM programs also provide ways for creating your own chat room for multiple users.

In the event someone tries to contact you and he/she isn't on your buddy/contact list, you have the option of accepting or rejecting the message. You also have the option of accepting or rejecting any files whether or not the person trying to send you something is on your buddy/contact list.

Disadvantages

Some people believe that viruses can be transmitted when using IM programs. This could happen if the user accepts a file from someone and the file is not run through an updated anti-virus software program such as McAfee at <http://us.mcafee.com/default.asp> or Norton available at <http://www.norton.com> prior to opening the file.

Some people don't care for IM programs is because folks can contact you when you are online and at times this could be a bad thing. However, IM users have the option of exiting out of their program when they don't want to be bothered. In addition, most IM programs have an away feature that users can put next to their name when they are unavailable.

Besides being invasive and disturbing at times, experts state that IM is an unsafe and unsecured method of communicating. Most IM companies warn their users about not giving important information out via IM such as credit card numbers, etc. In addition, one should be careful not to provide too much personal information in the preferences area of the program. Most IM programs have a preference area where users can include personal information such as name, address, e-mail, etc. According to Wired Teens, available at <http://www.wiredteens.org>, users, especially teenagers, should limit the information they make available in the preference area of any IM program. In addition, Wired Teens suggests not accepting a message from someone who is not part of your buddy/contact list.

Can't download?

Don't worry if your district or network administrator is giving you the blues about downloading any Instant

messenger program. I have good news. AOL has an Instant Messenger option on the Web that's referred to as AIM Express. With AIM Express, you can still send IM messages and communicate with folks without downloading the Instant Messenger software. All you need is a computer with Internet access, a Web browser such as Netscape Navigator/Communicator or Microsoft Internet Explorer, and a user name and password. To learn more about AIM Express please visit <http://www.aim.com/index.asp>, locate and select the AIM Express hyperlink.

Ways of utilizing Instant Messenger in ABLE

1. An ABLE instructor can utilize Instant messenger to communicate with adult learners. To illustrate, Jerusha McClendon, Project IDEAL instructor at Franklinton ABLE, uses IM to communicate with her online students for the distance learning pilot project. During orientation, she works with them to setup a buddy name and provides basic instruction on using the tool. After orientation, Jerusha provides them with her **virtual office hours** for the year so the Adult learners can communicate with her via IM whenever she is online.
2. The ABLELink technology team at the OLRC has been utilizing Instant Messenger to assist ABLE programs throughout the state with technical issues pertaining to the ABLELink program. To obtain the ABLELink Technology Team buddy names go to http://literacy.kent.edu/ablelink/vaccess/tech_support.html.
3. Minimize face-to-face meetings, multiple e-mails and conference calls. For example, most Instant Messenger programs have the capability of creating chat rooms. Someone could schedule a time to chat with key personnel, create a chat room and invite those individuals they need to communicate with inside the chat room. This would be a good way to chat with a few (up to 6) individuals around the state about issues or concerns that need to be addressed instead of sending multiple e-mail messages or participating in pricey conference calls.

Haven't tried IM? When utilized effectively, the positives of any Instant Messenger program definitely out weigh the negatives. To determine which Instant Messenger program is best for you, please visit the sites located under Instant Messenger Links.

Instant Messenger Links

- **AOL Instant Messenger**

The user does not have to have an AOL account to use AOL's IM program. It can be downloaded at: <http://www.aim.com/> The registration process is designed to activate a user name; there is no fee.

- **Yahoo Messenger**

Yahoo IM can be downloaded at <http://messenger.yahoo.com/>. The registration process is designed to activate a user name; there is no fee.

- **MSN Messenger**

MSN Messenger comes installed with newer versions of Windows. If an icon does not appear in the start menu or on the task bar, click Start > Help. In the search box, type messenger and follow the instructions in the result box. More information

and the latest version can be found at <http://messenger.msn.com/>.

- **Trillian**

Trillian offers a free basic version or a more sophisticated version for \$25.00. One caveat is that there are questions about legality* and appropriateness of Trillian's interaction with regard to the other IM networks. At times, the other IM networks will block Trillian users, a block which may last hours or days. However, if a user communicates with others who are on various networks, Trillian can be a very good tool. Find out more at <http://www.trillian.cc>.

*The legal issues are between the Trillian developers and the other IM networks. The end user of Trillian is not in a position of doing anything illegal.

Additional Instant Messenger Resources

- ICQ Instant Messenger
<http://web.icq.com/>
- How Instant Messaging Works
<http://computer.howstuffworks.com/instant-messaging.htm>
- What is Instant Messenger?
<http://www.franklin.k12.ma.us/rem8thpages/lealauren/what.html>
- Wired Kids, Online Safety for Kids and Teens!
<http://www.wiredteens.org/teensim.html>
- Instant Messenger Center
<http://home.peoplepc.com/im/>
- Using Instant Messenger
<http://www.english.vt.edu/~swenson/synchwork/im.html>
(unless you are familiar with the buddy/contact name)

