



## Got Some Computer Glitches?

You Can Rent Your Own Tech

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It's a typical high-tech nightmare: Your hard-drive crashes, your Internet service won't connect, your screen flashes "fatal error."

As companies from Hewlett-Packard to Gateway cut their tech-support staff to hold down costs, a number of small start-up companies are scrambling to fill the void. With names like Speak With a Geek and SupportFreaks, these companies advertise round-the-clock access by phone or e-mail to a certified tech worker, who can talk you through a computer meltdown (a virus devouring your hard drive) or answer basic questions (that's a CD drive, not an ejectable drink holder).

### **A guide to finding your own personal "help desk."**

Some of the companies -- still too new to have an established track record -- also offer to answer questions on dozens of common software programs, from TurboTax to Real Players. And while a computer maker normally won't touch anything that doesn't have its brand name on it, the new companies offer help with the full constellation of gadgets that plug into a typical home PC, from sound cards to hand-helds to MP3 players.

A few of the new services, including Ask Dr. Tech and LiveRepair, offer annual memberships for 24-hour support. Costs range between \$89 to \$240. Others, like Tech24 and Support Freaks, charge on a per-incident basis, with prices starting at \$15 per call.

The emerging industry feeds on the mounting desperation of consumers seeking help from PC vendors. Not only are some manufacturers rolling back their tech support, but many are also establishing new fees for customer-service calls. After installation, Microsoft now charges \$35 per incident on some software once it has resolved two problems free of charge. Handspring and Palm have introduced \$20 to \$25 fees for some tech-support calls after the first 90 days, and Yahoo recently introduced \$1.99-per-minute help calls.

Home-computer systems are also growing more complex, as people do everything from adding digital video-editing software to using their PCs as stereos. When consumers seek help with glitches, many find themselves bounced back and forth between vendors, each blaming the other for bugs or responsibility.

### **Two-Month Ordeal**

When Linda Schultz of Cambridge, Minn., couldn't open Microsoft Word on her new \$1,400 Dell PC, she called Dell's tech-support line. After being on hold 45 minutes, she says, a Dell Computer agent told her it was AOL's fault. After another hold, AOL told her it was Dell's fault.

So began a two-month ordeal, as Ms. Schultz tried to get her computer running. Each of her roughly 15 calls to Dell customer service involved a 30- to 45-minute wait, she says. Along the way, she threw the phone, threw a mop and stabbed a chair with a fork: "I aged 10 years," she says. Dell says it is making changes to improve caller "hold times," which have shrunk in recent months. AOL says roughly half of incoming customer-service calls are unrelated to its products and services, but it nonetheless tries to help.

The new services say they can avoid some of the confusion. "We'll support your Gateway talking to your Compaq talking to your scanner talking to your digital camera," says Stan Sams, who oversees tech support at Speak With a Geek, which launched in April. Both Ask Dr. Tech and Speak With a Geek support peripheral devices, like Palm Pilots and digital cameras.

### **Diagnostic Tools**

Some companies, like Tech24 and LiveRepair.com, use special diagnostic tools that let technicians enter your computer remotely to diagnose glitches. At the start of your first session, the companies prompt you to download and install a simple piece of software. They then connect with it to scour your computer for system information. With your permission, they can even take control of your mouse and keyboard, and you can watch their movements as they share your screen and open files and folders to fix problems.

Customer experience isn't entirely seamless from these small, often shoestring operations. The 800 technicians at Support Freaks all work remotely, meaning you may have to wait on the line as the operator tracks down an on-call tech worker to help you. (When we called, the answerer chatted with us for four minutes about his honeymoon in Maine.) Speak With a Geek has a small number of incoming phone lines. When we called, we got an answer from a person on the first ring, but then he had to call us back from another line to free up those for incoming calls.

Most of the newer companies neglect one segment of computer user: Mac fans. Speak With A Geek, for one, does offer services for Macs, but its Mac technician is available only during certain hours.

Also some of the new companies don't offer a phone option; both Tech24 and LiveRepair.com use remote diagnostic technology. The online format can be frustrating for explaining complex problems -- and of course tough luck if your Internet service is down.

### Cutting Phone Support

But the major tech companies are also cutting phone support, as they try to address customer questions online. Many manufacturers now offer numerous self-help tools, including searchable libraries and lists of frequently asked questions, sometimes abbreviated as FAQs. Cost savings drive the online push: A typical customer call costs about \$19, factoring in such things as labor and overhead, while a problem resolved online costs just 78 cents, according to Gartner Research.

Some people have gotten quick fixes from the new companies. In Quebec, 81-year-old Charles Moreau had already used up his free calls to Microsoft when his joystick wouldn't work for the company's Flight Simulator II. Following a quick online chat session with Tech24, he was back flying the virtual skies.

### Finding a Personal Tech

Company	Service	Cost	Comment
<b>Speak with a Geek</b> 866-933-HELP www.SpeakWithAGeek.com	Phone, e-mail, or online chat support for Windows, Macs, Linux and peripherals	\$34.95/month or \$239/year	All techs are Microsoft certified.
<b>Tech 24 Inc.</b> Tech24inc.com	Online support for Windows, Macs and peripherals	\$14.95 per incident	Can access your PC remotely to diagnose it.
<b>Ask Dr. Tech</b> 800-Ask-Dr-Tech www.AskDrTech.com	Support offered by phone, live chat or e-mail for PCs and Macs and peripherals	\$89/year for unlimited support	Getting through was no problem -- but the tech occasionally launched into heavy jargon.
<b>Support Freaks</b> 866-4-Freaks www.SupportFreaks.Com	Help offered by phone or Web chat for numerous software and hardware issues	Prices start at \$30/hour; half hour minimum	They have over 800 certified techs who work remotely.
<b>Live Repair</b> www.LiveRepair.Com	PC tech support through Web-based chat	\$99/year for unlimited support	Can access your PC remotely to troubleshoot and fix problems.