



HARDWARE KNOWLEDGE BASES

Hardware problems are not a funny business. You can spend days trying to identify iffy bits of kit locked deep within the guts of your PC, or that buggy driver responsible for timely blue screens just when you hit Save. Using telephone-based technical support isn't always a happy experience, either. Thankfully there are few good Web sites to save you time and effort, says Nick Nettleton

CREATIVE LABS

www.support.soundblaster.com

As the pre-eminent global supplier of graphics and sound widgets for your PC – most famously the SoundBlaster range – you'd expect something pretty spectacular from Creative Labs' on-line knowledge base. At Creative's support site you'll find an FAQ and troubleshooting section, as well as a myriad of driver and update

downloads and technical specifications. The troubleshooting section is the most impressive, with a substantial amount of information on your every question, arranged in an orderly tree-like fashion. Very neat, although it can take six or seven clicks down the branches to get to the piece of information you're after.

In the FAQ section you'll find a handy glossary of obscure technical terms. The information just about meets expectations, but certainly doesn't exceed them.

Got a problem with your soundcard? Creative aims to help.

PC Plus 6/10



INTEL

<http://support.intel.com>

Another pre-eminent supplier, can Intel, the behemoth of PC chipsets do better than Creative? The fact that its support opens with a JavaScript error in IES bodes ill, but the page appears to work fine and the range of topics it offers via a fancy navigation widget is quite remarkable.

In fact, Intel has been in the Web support business for several years and this site shows the benefits of its experience. A Troubleshooting Assistant guides you through a series of multiple choice steps, at the end of which you can find out what a particular error message means and what you can do about it.

Via the range of navigable topics, meanwhile, you can gain general information about your Intel products, including how to identify if they're genuine, how to deal with overheating and so on. All-in-all, this site is a pretty impressive resource for all your Intel-inside problems.



Intel's site offers an impressive array of hardware and technical support.

PC Plus 8/10



A slight chaotic site but the information is there.

<http://hp.com>

HEWLETT-PACKARD

Hewlett-Packard is most famous for printers, but also boasts a massive business across the hardware spectrum and, as such, should have a pretty impressive on-line support system. You need to go via the home page and click Services and Support at the top of the page, which leads you to a fairly chaotic list of products and product families.

From here you follow a series of steps to a home page for the product you're interested in; the content of these mini home pages varies considerably across the range of products, and so does the quality of information on offer – although the standard is typically fairly high.

This site is very efficient if you have a specific query about a specific HP product and should help you solve the most common problems with a minimum of bother.

PC Plus 7/10

IBM

www.ibm.com/support

IBM's site looks huge from the moment you arrive – all in corporate blue and black with very little in the way of visual friendliness.

There's a large search box on the main support page, clearly labelled 'Search knowledge base'. At the time of testing there appeared to be a fault in the search facility, which was erratically yielding 'Page not found' errors.

Nevertheless, we finally managed to get a result plugging the keywords 'corrupt hard drive' into the search, and the wealth of documents uncovered was impressive: some 200 of them, covering issues from specific error messages and faults to particular products.

These included quite a number of suggestions for recovering your apparent write-off file system without suffering the hell of reformatting your hard drive and losing everything.

All very impressive – if slow.



A bit corporate and forbidding, and surprisingly slow.

PC Plus 8/10