



OTTAWA PC NEWS

Vol. 19 number 5

The newsletter of the Ottawa PC Users' Group

May 2002

SOFTWARE REVIEW

DiskAlert *by Chris Taylor*

They say with hard disks, it is not *if* your disk is going to fail, but rather *when* your disk will fail. Anyone who has gone through a disk failure knows just how painful the process can be.

Of course, the most important line of defence in ensuring a disk failure is as painless as possible is to have a good backup strategy. For maximum ease and convenience, a complete backup of all hard disks on your computer is ideal. As a minimum, all documents should be safely backed up.

But, wouldn't it be nice to know your hard disk was about to fail before it died an untimely death? Enter DiskAlert, a new program from Executive Software. It is designed to constantly monitor your hard disks for errors. If you start getting errors, DiskAlert can notify you. The idea is that you can replace a failing hard drive before complete and catastrophic failure. In addition to monitoring for disk errors, DiskAlert can monitor the amount of free disk space.

DiskAlert can monitor just about any type of hard disk—IDE, SCSI, and both software and hardware RAID arrays. It only works on Windows NT, 2000, and XP, but you know my feelings on operating systems. I have not run Windows 9x (on any system I cared about) for almost 2 years now.

DiskAlert has two thresholds you can set—warning and critical. When DiskAlert reaches one of those thresholds, it notifies you. It can do this with a pop-up window, e-mail, pager, or even a phone call. For phone calls, you can have it play a WAV file. Nifty! You can have completely different notifications for warning thresholds than those for critical. There is a global configuration for all drives. An over-ride can be set on any disk to have different thresholds or notifications. You could set an operating system disk to notify at a very low threshold of errors and



a disk with games installed to a very high threshold. Or vice-versa, depending on which you value more!

One of the nice features about DiskAlert is that you can configure remote agents on any or all the computers on your network (licenses are required for each disk) and you can have a single console configure all machines.

When you call up the program, it loads as a Microsoft Management Console snap-in. The left pane shows the workgroups/domains being monitored and below each of those, the computers being monitored. The right pane is split horizontally, with the top having a listing of the drives being monitored and the bottom showing the status of the selected drive. It is this last pane that proved to be the biggest pain for me.

continued page 3

INSIDE

Club news — Club life

<i>Calendar / Coming Up</i>	2
<i>Raffle / Prizewinners</i>	2
<i>Membership Drive</i>	6

Features

<i>Disk Alert - Software Review</i>	1
<i>Admin Pak v3.0 - Software Review</i>	4
<i>Developer Conference Report</i>	7

Next meeting: **WEDNESDAY, May 8th, 2002**

PowerPoint Demonstration in May

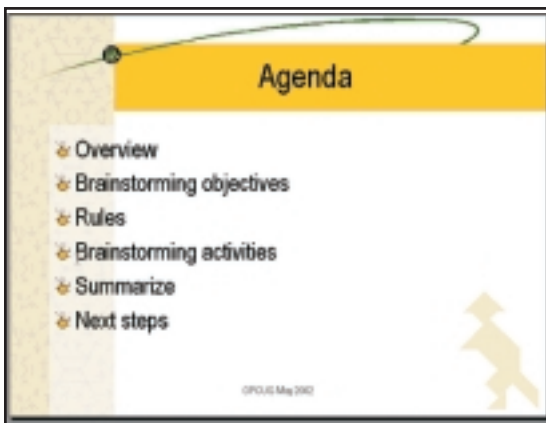
by Tim Mahoney

Come out to see Synergys VP Suzanne Blain share her knowledge of Microsoft Powerpoint 2000 with you. Suzanne has been providing a variety of teaching services at Algonquin College since the early nineties.

We have asked her to cover simple to more advanced techniques using Powerpoint. Knowing our membership has a broad scope of existing knowledge in the area, she will attempt to introduce the novice to basic usage of Powerpoint, demonstrating how to build custom Powerpoint presentations, handling tables, charts, graphics, using macros and more.

She will expand the discussion to include more advanced presentation features including packing and publishing your presentation . She will

address some frequently asked questions about Powerpoint (and presentations) and offer some tips and tricks to help make the job easier.



Prize winners

by Mark Cayer

Our prize winners from the meeting of April 10, 2002:

- Mark Cayer won the raffle prize, a copy of the ERD Commander Software from Winternals Software.
- Bob Walker and J.P. Legault both won a CD wallet donated by ExitCertified.



CALENDAR

Meetings	Date	Time and venue
OPCUG General Meeting	Wednesday, May 8 th	7:30 p.m. Auditorium of the National Museum of Science and Technology, 1867 St. Laurent Blvd.
Internet SIG (I-SIG)	Wednesday, May 8 th	Come and join our discussions!
Developers SIG	Wednesday, May 8 th	Immediately following the main OPCUG presentation, and occasionally at other locations in the region.
Delphi User Group	TBA	8:00 p.m. at Chapters Store in the Pinecrest Mall (at the Queensway)
Ottawa Paradox Users Group	3 rd Thursday each month	6:00-8:00 p.m. — Corel Bldg 1600 Carling Ave

Please note that unless otherwise noted, SIGs meet at 9:00 p.m. (immediately following the OPCUG General Meeting).

DiskAlert ...continued

You can switch between showing *Disk Health* and *Disk Space used*. When you choose *Disk Space Used*, a pie chart shows the current usage. This is no more than Windows Explorer will show you, other than the fact that the chart will be green if usage is below the warning threshold, yellow if it is between the warning and critical thresholds, and red if it is above the critical threshold.

Disk Health shows as a line graph, and is confusing. There are yellow and red horizontal bars representing the warning and critical thresholds. A thin red graphing line shows the error rate, and a thin blue line shows the disk throughput. I never saw any errors on my drive, so I can't comment on how the graphing of errors works. But for disk throughput, there appears to be problems with choosing ranges to show. While you can select ranges of all, today, this week, or this month, no matter what I choose, the graph doesn't change at all. It appears to always show the disk throughput for just the current day.

But the problems with the graph do not stop there. I was surprised to see the blue graphing line so low on the chart. Then I noticed a tool-tip type window appear when I hovered over areas of the graph. It detailed the exact throughput at a particular point in time. It turns out that the graph is actually upside down. Any spikes in the graph represent a *decrease* in throughput. The help file does explain this, but it does not explain what the numbers in the scale to the left of the chart mean. On my system it appeared to be a logarithmic scale with 0 at the bottom, 6.84 about 1/3 of the way up the scale, 46.78 about 2/3 of the way up and 320 at the top.

When I first tested the email notification, it wasn't working. There were no error messages. Clicking the help question mark in the dialog box used to define notifications and clicking on various parts of the dialog box did not bring up any help text. The help file, when opened manually did not tell me anything. I discovered that the *Sender* needed to be in an SMTP format, such as

DiskAlert@opcug.ca, rather than something like *Drive-C*. I did not get any error message when I tried to use *Drive-C* and then clicked on the *Test* button. It just didn't work. Note that it doesn't have to be a valid SMTP address. It just has to look like one. Once I configured the *Sender* to look like an SMTP address, email notifications worked fine.

When I first started testing DiskAlert, I found that my hard drive would grind away like crazy every minute or so. I was beginning to suspect Disk Alert would *cause* a premature death of my hard drive rather than just left me know it was about to happen! When I got an updated build (1.3.234.0), this problem went away.

DiskAlert requires Windows NT (SP5 or greater), Windows 2000, or Windows XP and Internet Explorer 5.5 or higher. It uses only a couple of megabytes of disk space. On my system, which has 512MB RAM, the three services (DiskAlert Agent, DiskAlert Licensing, and DiskAlert Notification) took 14MB of RAM.

I struggled to find a reason to purchase DiskAlert. I added up the pluses and came up with the following: DiskAlert will notify you when disk space gets low or if your disk starts getting errors that are higher than a certain threshold so you can replace the disk before total failure. You can have a single console view to your entire organization of multiple computers and hard disks.

On the minus side of the equation, I have the graphing that does not seem to be working correctly. On critical systems, most people run RAID 5 arrays that will allow complete failure of a single disk without loss of data. Given that DiskAlert starts at US\$50 for a single license and drops to US\$15 if you buy more than 1,000 licenses, it seems out of proportion with the cost of disks these days. I compare it somewhat to the cost of extended warranties on consumer electronics (which I think also tend to be way over-priced.) If you think of them in the 10% to 15% range, that would translate into DiskAlert being priced at about CAN\$20 to CAN\$30, not CAN\$75. I know that this sort of comparison is not really comparing apples to apples, but still. Also, consider that DiskAlert is licensed on a *per disk* basis, not *per computer*!

DiskAlert is probably really targeted more at the enterprise than individuals. But even there, I just don't see it as being a cost-effective solution. Most enterprises run RAID5 arrays for servers. The loss of a single disk is not a problem. Really critical servers have hot standby disks. In the event of a failure of one disk in the array, a rebuild begins immediately on the standby disk, reducing the likelihood of a second disk failure causing downtime.

Having said all that, I suspect DiskAlert is worthwhile for the truly paranoid or for those who can not afford to take any chances at all. If you absolutely *must* know about an impending disk failure before it happens, it is probably an effective tool.

You can download a 30-day trial version from www.execsoft.com.



Admin Pak v3.0

by Chris Taylor

Last month I looked at Winternals Software's flagship product, ERD Commander 2002. This month, I continue with two other products included in the Admin Pak v3.0; Remote Recover and Disk Commander. Next month, I will wrap up with a review of the final portions of the Admin Pak; NTFSDOS Pro and Monitoring Tools.

Remote Recover v2.0

While ERD Commander is the best overall product for fixing broken copies of Windows NT/2K/XP, there are times when all you really need to do is get access to the hard drive of a system that won't boot properly. Maybe you know the fix is as simple as replacing a corrupted boot.ini. Maybe you just need to get some data off the drive before scrapping the existing OS on the machine. Or maybe you don't have a CD-ROM drive that supports booting on the machine — you have to be able to boot from the CD-ROM in order to use ERD Commander. Under circumstances like these, Remote Recover v2.0, available as part of the Admin Pak v3.0 and as a separate product, may be just the ticket.

With Remote Recover, you can boot a sick system using a floppy disk or PXE-downloaded image. PXE stands for Pre-boot eXecution Environment and is typically used to allow the installation of an operating system across the network when the target machine has no OS. Once booted, you can then access the disks on the sick system from another computer on the network. The drives on the sick system appear exactly as if they are local disks.

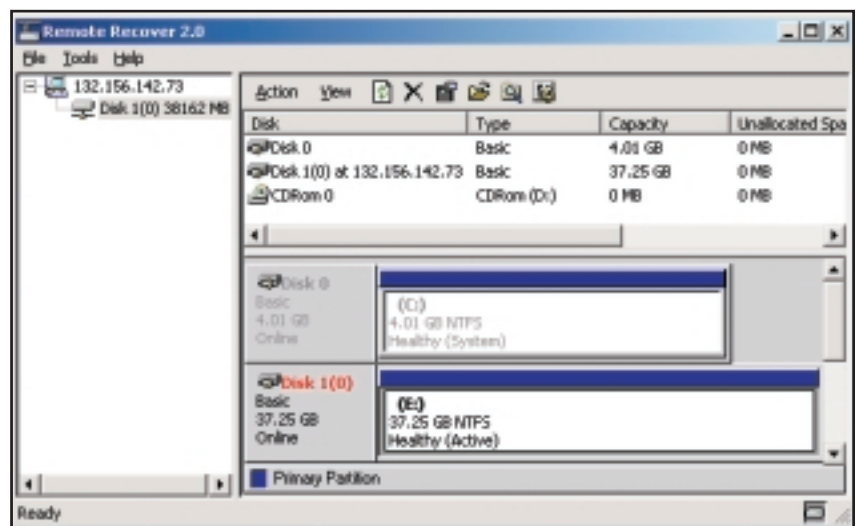
To get started, you use the client wizard which helps you set up either a client boot disk or a PXE boot image. PXE requires a PXE-capable network adapter and BIOS as well as a DHCP server that supports the PXE boot protocol, so I just went with the client boot disk.

The wizard was very simple to work with and in a matter of a couple of minutes I had a boot disk prepared. If you are using an ISA network card, you need to know some details about the resources the card uses such as the IRQ and IO port. If it's a PCI card, this is all automatic. Even I managed to get it working, so it must be pretty foolproof. Security options in the wizard may be selected to restrict what machines will be able to connect to this client.

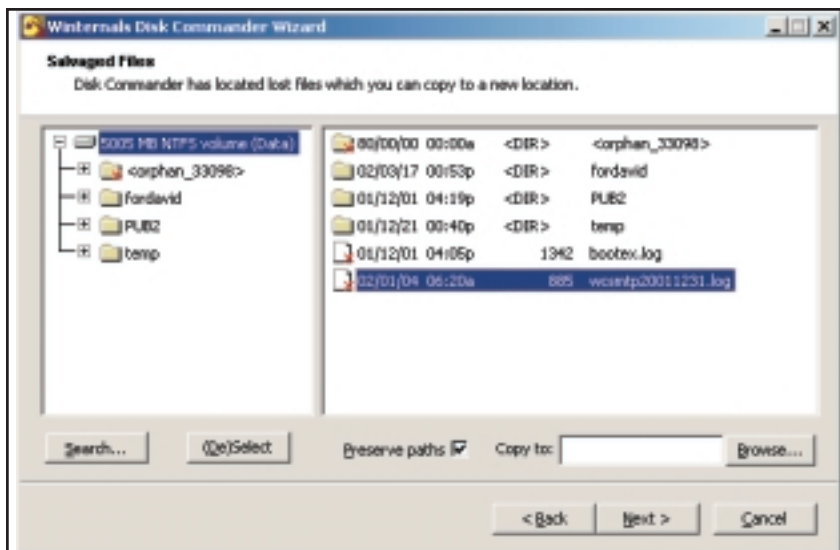
Once you have booted a computer from the client disk, you run the Remote Recover host software on a working copy of Windows NT/2K/XP. It broadcasts a query over the network and any client machines respond and present a list of available disks. If they happen to be on a different subnet, where a broadcast may not function, you can manually add them by specifying the IP address of the client machine. Then, you simply use the Mount command to make the remote disks appear as through they are local disks. You may optionally mount a drive in read-only mode. This can be useful if you suspect damage and don't want to make things worse by writing to the disk while recovering data.

What can you do with these remote disks? Anything you can do with a local disk. You can copy files back and forth, partition and format disks, run chkdsk or other repair software, run anti-virus programs, etc. Remote Recover also includes the Locksmith program mentioned in the ERD Commander 2002 review, which allows you to reset the password on any account on the client system, as long as the System Registry hive is intact.

For many circumstances Remote Recover will allow you to either salvage data or repair a broken installation. A real time-saver.



Remote disk mounted as drive E:



Recovering deleted files

Disk Commander v1.1

What if you have damaged disks? How about deleted files? What if you accidentally deleted a partition? ERD Commander and Remote Recover are not designed to help you out there. Included in the Admin Pak, and available as a separate product, is Disk Commander v1.1, which is specifically designed to recover data from FAT, FAT32 and NTFS volumes that have been deleted, damaged or even reformatted.

Disk Commander provides what, at first glance, appears to be a confusing array of options on how you can use it. But it turns out this is a good thing, because it provides maximum flexibility. If the damaged portion is on an otherwise working copy of Windows (from 95 through XP), you can run it as a standard Windows program. If the system is unable to boot, you can run it from an MS-DOS 6.22 or better floppy. Finally, you can run it from either a set of WinNT/2K/XP boot floppies or from a bootable CD-ROM.

While running the setup wizard, you are prompted for various options, depending on your configuration. There are options for FAT32 support when running on NT4, SP4 integration when running on NT4 to enable access to IDE volumes larger than 8GB, and integration of OEM drivers for SCSI adapters not natively supported. If you are creating a bootable CD-ROM, the instructions are long and involved, but quite clear and easy to follow.

If the volume you want to deal with is accessible, you can choose a drive letter to start the repair process. Otherwise, you can have Disk Commander do an exhaustive search of your drive looking for partitions, such as deleted partitions and those that are so damaged as to be not recognized by Windows.

You can bring up an explorer-style window and select “normal” files and copy them to another location. You can also look for deleted files and directories. As always, when trying to recover deleted files,

directories or partitions, the sooner you do it, the better your chances are that the items you want will be recoverable.

To test, I used PowerQuest’s Partition Magic to resize my D drive down by about 300MB and created a new logical drive; E. I formatted it as FAT32 so I could easily identify it later, since this machine has never had a FAT32 partition on it. I then copied four directories to drive E, and deleted a few of the files. Finally, I deleted the logical drive.

As the deleted partition was no longer available as a drive letter, I had Disk Commander search for all partitions. I have used Partition Magic a number of times on this drive, so there were a number of phantom partitions that showed up. But, as I expected, I could easily find the partition because I knew its approximate size (300MB), the location (the end of the disk), and the format (FAT32).

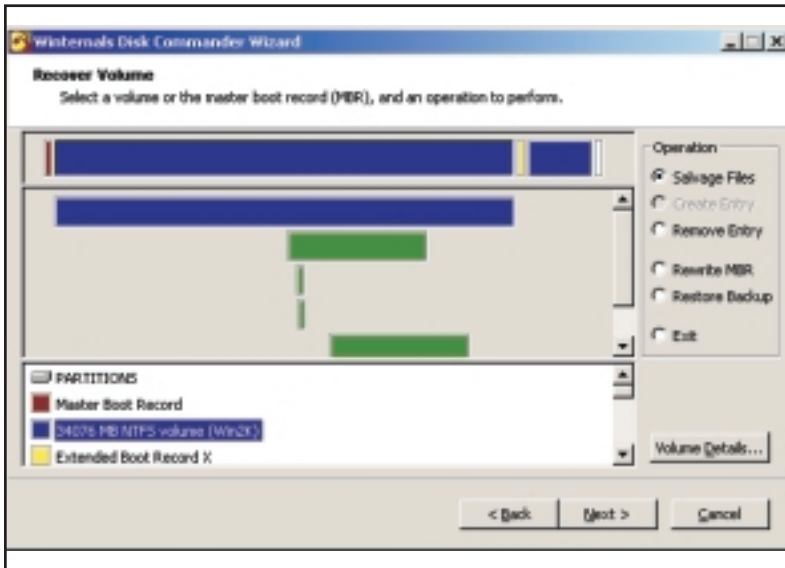
I first thought I was going to have to recover the partition before I could access the files. This is the sort of operation that always makes me nervous. What if I accidentally selected the wrong partition? What would it do if it overlapped an existing partition? What if my configuration somehow confused Disk Commander and garbage was written to disk when it tried to recover the partition? Well, it turns out that you don’t even have to recover the lost partition. I was able to bring up the explorer-like interface and copy the files off the lost partition, including the deleted files. Very slick!

The version of Disk Commander that runs from within Windows does not allow you to recover entire partitions, so I booted from the DOS floppy version of Disk Commander. The search for lost partitions took a *lot* longer to run from the DOS floppy version, but I was able to easily find and recover the deleted partition, with all files intact.

All in all, I found Disk Commander to be a powerful program for recovering data. A tip; if all you are looking to do is recover deleted files, Winternals has an inexpensive (US\$39)

continued page 4

program called File Restore specifically designed for recovering deleted files. It won't help with deleted or damaged partitions, but if the partition is accessible, it actually provides some extra searching capabilities that Disk Commander does not provide.



Recovering files from deleted partitions

System Requirements

Remote Recover requires Windows NT/2K/XP for the host machine. The client machine has no special requirements, other than the need for a Network card. The network must be using TCP/IP.

Disk Commander requires Windows 9x/ME/NT/2K/XP for initial setup. Program may be run from a system with any (or no) operating system. Supported disk formats are FAT, FAT32, and NTFS.

Admin Pak v3.0 \$US699 (includes ERD Commander, Remote Recover, Disk Commander, NTFSDOS Pro, and Monitoring Tools)

Remote Recover v2.0 \$US349

Disk Commander v1.1 \$US299

See www.wininternals.com for information and to download demo versions of most products.



CLUB NEWS

Membership Drive Continues *by Bob Gowan*

Thanks to the club members who signed in guests at the April general meeting. Each guest earns for their sponsoring club member a ticket for the draw to be held at our June meeting. As it stands right now, each of those tickets would be a winner. But all club members still have a very good chance to win by bringing one or more guests to the May meeting. Your guests are invited to attend both the main presentation and the SIG sessions that follow.

Here's how the contest works: When you arrive at the meeting with your guest, search out our contest registrar by the membership table at the back of the auditorium. Sign-in your guest and you will automatically be entered for one of the four prizes. Every guest you sign-in gives you one chance to win. Note please, that immediate family members living at the same address are always welcome to attend, but sorry, they do not get you a ticket for the draw.

While we don't want you to pressure your guests to become members, if they do take out an OPCUG membership before the start of the June meeting, you will receive two more tickets.

At our June meeting, four prizes will be awarded to sponsoring members. The first one drawn will have their choice of either: Drive Copy or Drive Image, both donated by PowerQuest; Koala HTML, donated by Avantrix; or a free OPCUG membership for a year. The three software products were reviewed recently (November 2001 and March 2002) in Ottawa PC News. Thanks to PowerQuest (www.powerquest.com) and Avantrix (<http://avantrix.com>) for their contributions.



2nd Alpha Five Developer's Conference

by Bob Gowan

I am starting to write this report just after returning from the conference, and I am PUMPED! What an incredible weekend! Having attended the first conference, in early December of 2000, I wouldn't have missed this one for (almost) anything. For me, this would cost three days of annual leave during the busiest time of year at work, paying my own conference fees, travel and hotel expenses and driving alone for almost 7 hours to Boston area and back, all just for the fun of it!! But it was worth every bit of the cost and far more.

Alpha Five is an amazing relational database software that allows new users and experienced programmers to create functional and rock solid Windows database applications with speed and ease. It is not surprising, therefore, that both of these groups were well represented at the conference, as well as others covering the full range between those extremes. It is also no surprise that most of the 90 or so participants were from the US, with many states represented. There were several other Canadians, several from the UK, and others from Europe and South America. Over these two conferences, I have found the Alpha community to be a great bunch of people – knowledgeable and so willing to share, friendly and fun-loving, considerate and helpful. From the Thursday evening registration and social get-together to wrap up late Sunday afternoon, there was barely time to sleep.

This conference, like the first, was organized and sponsored by Ira Perlow of Computer Systems Design & Associates from Waltham, MA, and held at the comfortable Sheraton Four Points Barcelo Hotel in nearby Burlington, MA. The conference rooms were set up so that laptops could be used and many participants tried for themselves what was being shown by presenters. Except for Ira's profuse apologies, a few glitches early in the conference may well have gone unnoticed. The program was full, diverse and useful, including prepared presentations under two streams: Business, and Advanced, as well as feature demonstrations, group work sessions and discussions. Each day, from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., we absorbed all we could about Alpha Five from the scheduled events; and generally continued later in the hotel bar or someone's room.

The Business track sessions catered to users from small- to medium-sized business and organizations, many of whom were developing complex applications to meet their specific needs. Presentations in this session dealt with topics such as building applications without programming and converting applications to newer versions. Because Alpha is so easy to use, some of these users have grown their highly specialized applications into successful commercial products or consulting businesses. As a result, there was quite a bit of traffic between conference rooms during session breaks. The Advanced track



was more oriented towards professional programmer consultants and more experienced in-house developers. Presentations in this track covered topics like advanced querying and reporting, and user-defined functions. All of the presenters are well-known in the Alpha community. A couple have published books on Alpha, several provide training on Alpha products and all are regular contributors and problem-solvers on Alpha's online user forum.

Great product, great people, great place, great program, great presentations – what more could you ask for a perfect conference? With this one being held about a mile away from the home of Alpha Software, we were fortunate to have with us for most of conference, the co-owners and most of the key staff of Alpha. Imagine being able to meet, face to face, with the lead developer to explain a new feature you'd like in the next version; or discussing pricing policies and promotional strategies with the head of marketing. Being a small, specialized software company, Alpha Software takes pride in listening to their users' needs.

For me, the highlight of the conference was the demonstrations by Alpha co-founder Selwyn Rabins, of the next version, v.5, of Alpha Five. For six hours or so on Friday afternoon and Saturday night, we were awed by a few of the very large number of new features and by Alpha's plans for future development. There are far too many features to attempt to describe here, but another report from the conference, published in the Alpha newsletter, and cited below, provides a few

OTTAWA PC NEWS

Ottawa PC News is the newsletter of the Ottawa PC Users' Group (OPCUG), and is published monthly except in July and August. The opinions expressed in this newsletter may not necessarily represent the views of the club or its members.

Member participation is encouraged! If you would like to contribute an article to *Ottawa PC News*, please submit it to the newsletter editor (contact info below). Deadline for submissions is three Saturdays before the next General Meeting.



Group Meetings

OPCUG meets on the second Wednesday in the month, except July and August, at the Canada Science and Technology Museum, 1867 St. Laurent Blvd, Ottawa. Meetings are 7:30–9:00 p.m. and Special Interest Groups go until 10 p.m.

Fees

OPCUG annual membership: \$25 per year.

Mailing Address

3 Thatcher St., Nepean, Ontario, K2G 1S6

Web address

<http://opcug.ca>

Bulletin board — the PUB II (BBS)

Up to 33.6 kbps V.34. 228-8951

Chairman and System Administrator

Chris Taylor ctaylor@nrcan.gc.ca 727-5453

Meeting Coordinator

Tim Mahoney timothy@cyberus.ca 225-2630

Treasurer

Vince Pizzamiglio vince@monisys.ca

Webmaster

Brigitte Lord opcug@iname.com

Secretary

(Mr.) Jocelyn Doire Jocelyn.Doire@opcug.ca

Membership Chairman

Mark Cayer Mark.Cayer@StatCan.Ca 823-0354

Newsletter

Bert Schopf (editor) bert@blackbirdpcd.com . . . 232-8427
(Mr.) Jocelyn Doire (distributor, electronic version): Jocelyn.Doire@opcug.ca

Public Relations

Morris Turpin morris.turpin@rogers.com 729-6955

Directors without portfolio

Bob Gowan gowanb@inac.gc.ca
Ted May tamay@rogers.com

Facilities

Bob Walker skywalk@iname.com 489-2084

Beginners' and Windows SIG coordinator

Duncan Petrie gdpetr@hotmail.com 841-6119

Internet SIG coordinator

Norm Dafoe ndafoe@sirius.ca

Paradox SIG coordinator

John Ladds laddsj@statcan.ca 951-4581

Delphi SIG coordinator

Stan Isbrandt isbrandt@trytel.com . . 992-8141 / 729-7793

Orphan SIG coordinator

Henry Sims ha4326@rogers.com

Developers' SIG

Bob Thomas bobthomas@msn.com

© OPCUG 2002. Reprint permission is granted* to non-profit organizations, provided credit is given to the author and *The Ottawa PC News*. OPCUG requests a copy of the newsletter in which reprints appear.

*Permission is granted only for articles written by OPCUG members, and which are not copyrighted by the author.



details. It is clear, though, that this version is going to create a splash when it is released this summer. Consider, for example, some of the comments volunteered by conference participants on the Alpha message forum, just after the conference:

"It's just UNBELIEVABLE what Alpha Software (actually, Selwyn Rabins) has been able to accomplish with this product. If this isn't a giant killer, I don't know what is."

"..., I think it's safe to say you can't speak about Access in the same league as A5V5."

"Fantastic Conference! Alpha 5 v 5.0 What a product!"

"... Version 5 is like going from a chipped flint stone to a laser cutter as a working tool."

"... anyone — I MEAN ANYONE — can create complex database apps with this incredible product!"

"Ver. 5 is Mindblowing!"

We all left this conference with one of the numerous door prizes, a thick binder of speakers presentation notes, a beta copy of the new version 5 of Alpha Five, and plenty of good thoughts. I, like the others, look forward with excitement and enthusiasm to working with the beta product.

For further information, check the Conference website:

<http://www.ultranet.com/~csda/a5conf/>

Alpha Software is located at:

<http://alphasoftware.com/>

Another report on the conference can be found in the April 2002 Alpha Newsletter at :

http://www.imakenews.com/alphasoftware/e_article000063405.cfm

