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Imagine strolling into a city park for your lunch break. It is a bright, sunny day and the birds are chirping in the background. As you finish your lunch you suddenly remember that you were supposed to send an important e-mail. If you happen to be eating in Central Park in New York, you could simply open your laptop and log on to the free Wi-Fi network and send your e-mail.

One of the most interesting areas of wireless networking in the past couple years has been the emergence of community Local Area Networks based on sharing network access using the 802.11b standard (commonly known as Wi-Fi or WLAN).

According to U.S. officials, more than 20 million people will be using wireless Internet access worldwide by 2007. Lufthansa, SAS, United, and Delta have already begun to turn their fleets of planes into large Wi-Fi hotspots. McDonald’s restaurants in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Canada are offering Wi-Fi to customers. Schlotzsky’s Deli restaurants also offer free Wi-Fi.

Cities such as New York; Long Beach, CA; Gainesville, FL; Athens, GA: and St. Louis, MO, have set up large outdoor downtown Wi-Fi Zones or Clouds where the Wi-Fi signals have a greater range than the typical 100-300 ft. This is largely an unplanned movement, working to share access for free or free with some sort of purchase. Even RV owners are choosing campgrounds based on free high-speed Wi-Fi access.

Paid Wi-Fi service providers include several major phone companies. Sprint is launching a service that will offer Wi-Fi access to customers across the country. Sprint’s PCS Wi-Fi Access network will include more than 800 public locations later this fall and 2100 locations by year’s end. SBC Communications Inc., the No. 2 U.S. local telephone company, unveiled a plan to offer a new Wi-Fi wireless Internet service to customers in 6000 locations over the next three years. AT&T and MCI also have big plans for Wi-Fi network services.

What Is Wi-Fi?

Wi-Fi, or wireless fidelity, is a term used generically to refer to any product or service using any type of 802.11 wireless networking protocols. Wi-Fi networks operate in the unlicensed 2.4 and 5 GHz radio bands, with an 11 Mbps (802.11b) or 54 Mbps (802.11a or g) data rate, respectively. Wi-Fi is popularly known as 802.11b. Apple Computer sells Wi-Fi cards as Apple Airport. Intel now includes Wi-Fi functionality with processors known as Intel Centrino.

The Wi-FI Alliance is a nonprofit international association formed in 1999 to certify interoperability of wireless LAN products based on IEEE 802.11 specification. Currently the Wi-Fi Alliance has 198 member companies from around the world, and 865 products have received Wi-Fi certification since the program began in March 2000.

To connect to a Wi-Fi hotspot, you will need a wireless/Wi-Fi enabled laptop or other Wi-Fi enabled device like the Palm Pilot or iPAQ handheld. Most recently manufactured laptops are configured for wireless and some may come equipped with a wireless adapter card. Otherwise, you'll need to purchase an adapter card ($35-$90).

A Wi-Fi wireless connection allows you to do anything you would normally do from home or the office. You can surf the web, check your e-mail, or connect to your corporate network (be sure to use a secure VPN connection). Check the security details of any network you log onto.

There are several new web sites that make it easy to find the location of Wi-Fi hotspots. www.Wi-FiZone.com
allows users to search a database of about 1600 hotels, airports, restaurants, and other wireless access points in 23 countries.
www.wifi411.com
is another popular directory.
Free Networks
offers a directory of free Wi-Fi hotspots.

Recently a collaborative effort launched between the University of Kansas' Information & Telecommunications Technology Center and Kansas Applied Remote Sensing Program created an advanced wireless 802.11b mapping and network visualization method. This new procedure uses wireless network data collected from walking and/or driving scans, aerial photography, and interpolation techniques to create highly detailed network coverage and signal strength maps. Another Wi-Fi mapping site is the
Atlas of Cyberspaces
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