

What is a Firewall, and why is one important?

What is a firewall?

Imagine a busy city intersection, where the traffic lights are out of service. There is a traffic officer regulating the flow through the junction.

A firewall is the equivalent of the traffic officer – it regulates the flow of traffic into and out of your network – whether the network is a large company, or an individual sitting on a home broadband Internet connection.

A firewall can cost from multiple tens of thousands of pounds (or dollars, or Euro, etc..) down to being freely available for download. For more information have a look at www.desertrat-it.com/broadband.pdf

Why is it important?

The kind of computer virus known as a worm spreads from computer to computer, without any interaction – your PC could be harbouring a nasty without your knowledge!

A firewall is part of your defences against this kind of computer virus, as it prevents worms spreading onto your computer. A firewall can do a lot more than this, but the extra features are out of the scope of this document.

So why the worry about worms and viruses?

In brief, for the last couple of years or so – since 2003 or thereabouts – worms and viruses have moved away from being vandals trying to delete your computer data, to making your computer act as a participant in criminal activities such as spamming, hacking, and industrial blackmail.

They do this by installing what is called a “back door” on your computer, which allows the criminals to take control of your computer without your knowledge or consent.

The use of a good anti virus program, which is **regularly** updated, cannot be emphasised enough. Please note the word in **bold** – **regularly**. Start up your anti virus program and check how long ago the virus detection patterns were updated – you should be updating **daily**, not weekly or monthly.

Also make sure you are actually protected by the anti virus programs – some of the big name anti virus programs stop working unless you pay them an annual subscription!

There is a very good free anti virus program called AVG available from <http://free.grisoft.com>

The most up to date version of this document is available as a free download from <http://www.desertrat-it.com/documents/firewall.pdf>