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AlphaShield

by Jayne Parkhouse

FOR

As for ease of use, I think it's all been said: very neat, very easy to install and use and basically foolproof.

AGAINST

The auxiliary port should have a clear warning on it or the letters 'AUX' should be in red as a warning since it would be quite easy to mistakenly link up to it and not be security compliant.

VERDICT

Very easy, extremely simple and very effective.

Protecting your online experience and enabling a secure connection, whether cable, broadband, ISDN or wireless, is the only way to go these days. With so much emphasis on security, no one should be using any form of internet access without the necessary protection being put firmly in place. There are lots of new gizmos and large appliances on the market to choose from, and many offer other utilities along with the initial security offering, such as added anti-virus or built-in intrusion detection. But for some, who have already spent their budget on these security applications, a box that separates the big bad world from you and your computer is probably the way forward.

AlphaShield is a small box a little bigger than a deck of playing cards that can provide a physical barrier between the internet and your system. Now that most people are using an always-on connection the need to tighten our security practices is greater than ever. This box delivers a 'plug-and-play' experience that requires no software or configuration changes and therefore can be easily and quickly added to your overall security without any mishaps. Often the point of applying a new security application, whether it is software or hardware, is lost when the configuration settings conflict with other applications and a new hole is opened up in your defenses, so this type of device is a godsend if you aren't that computer-savvy.

The product uses a technology which the developers call AlphaGap. This enables a quick installation with no assigned IP address; it also means that your computer is provided with IP address anonymity. This is because the AlphaShield sits between the live internet connection and the computer, concealing its identity from the outside world. The developers express the workings of the AlphaShield as possessing non-volatile memory. This means that it can't be altered and its proprietary operating code stored within is safe from both hacker and user intervention. As it is protected from change it can't be circumnavigated; the only time protection is deemed useless is when it is physically unplugged and the internet connection is reinstated without the AlphaShield in place.

Using its real-time packet authorization (RPA) and stealth technology, the connection made to either the network or internet remains secure, affording the user data protection while connected to either source. It also offers an auxiliary port to allow other IP devices to be connected, but although it provides another

socket for, say, a VoIP connection, be warned that this port offers no security so do not use this as your computer connection. Because it requires no software to be installed, AlphaShield is totally operating system independent and can be used no matter what platform you are running on. This gives you far greater flexibility than some of the other network security devices that do a similar job.

AlphaShield is also apparently immune from viruses and other attacks, although we did not test this claim. Being plug-and-play does mean that it can be used for mobile computing too and the user has the benefit of utilizing its security capabilities in the home office when telecommuting. Another benefit that became apparent was the lack of hardware conflict between the already installed router and firewall so it was not necessary to change any settings at all.

It comes with an AC adapter (universal 9 volt DC adapter) that provides the power source required to run the AlphaShield and it is also supplied with a RJ-45 network cable that's about six feet (1.83m) long. A user's guide and an installation document are provided, but why you'd need these when it is so easy to install we couldn't see. Not that we're complaining; some of the documentation seen with other devices can leave a lot to be desired.

Once plugged in and working there are three modes to choose from: Lockout mode with a 15 minute physical disconnect; Auto mode, which keeps your connection live come what may; and the first choice, Manual mode, which provides a very acceptable 15 minute inactivity cut off that provides a disconnect. The manual mode is the one we preferred and it worked very well, giving off a flashing green LED to warn of an impending disconnection in approximately 30 seconds if we didn't intervene. You also get visual inbound and outbound data information from the LED as well as the connect and disconnect buttons on the top of the box.

Although apparently immune from viruses, the AlphaShield should not be relied upon to protect against infection. One thing the manual does make very clear is the need for up-to-date anti-virus protection. And for anyone still on dial-up via an internal modem, there may be a suitable AlphaShield solution in the offing.

SC MAGAZINE RATING	
Features	★★★★☆
Ease of use	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★
Documentation	★★★★★
Support	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★★★
OVERALL RATING	★★★★★

CONTACT DETAILS

AlphaShield

North America

Supplier AlphaShield, Inc.

Price \$129

Contact www.alphashield.com

UK/Europe

Supplier Syrona Systems Ltd

Price £119

Contact www.syrona.co.uk

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