An idiot adrift on Microsoft's sea

I always read Mod O'Donnell's weekly column, not just because he has accessible writing, but he addresses things relevant to me – like computer hacking.

He recently talked about risks to New Zealand's middle-sized companies. Apparently, we have nearly 50,000 SMEs, or small-to-medium size enterprises, outfits with between six and 50 employees. He described the pressing need for a government agency to get its act together and provide them with computer security advice and support.

Few, if any, SMEs, have the resources to protect themselves properly from recent global hacks like the esoterically named WannaCry and NotPetya. The first of those created trouble for users of Microsoft Windows, the very software used to write the words you read here.

As a freelance writer, I don't get to share big company computer system protections. We're an enterprise of just two, too small even to fit into Mod's SME category. Yet we (the Chief Technical Officer and I) are just as reliant on computer security as any other organisation, although because of our diminutive size less likely to be targeted (hopefully).

Although I've been using computers since about 1990, I still don't know enough about them to be sure of anything. In those early days, I recall *Metro* magazine founding editor Warwick Roger asking: "But where do the words go?" I still don't know.

Nevertheless, I feel entitled to have suspicions, and one of them concerned WannaCry's impact on Microsoft. I had a nightmare week interacting with the outfit co-founded by Mr Gates, a period that ended with me giving a small cheer when I read he'd been toppled from first place on the world's rich-list.

Microsoft's ubiquitous text program, Word, is a wonderful product, but the means by which we access it is less great because of the convoluted relationship users must endure with the owners, although to be fair they're no worse than Amazon, Wordpress and other software behemoths.

Actually, my troubles began long ago when the days of buying a disk with the software on it ended when Microsoft insisted we pay for an online licence instead. That seemed straightforward enough, but being only vaguely conversant with how it all worked, I ended up with several presences on the global giant's books. That's because whenever the CTO (Lin) happened to be away, I would inevitably need to do something with the Microsoft account, but couldn't manage it. So I would start another account.

Problems can arise because it seems an email address – not your name – is the only unique identifier that can be used for each account, so it's easy to use various emails to accumulate separate free accounts in haphazard fashion, and forget which is which or how many you have or where they are. If you're an idiot like me, you end up with your computer offering you numerous options to save files to the system's online storage warehouse, OneDrive.

None of that seemed to matter too much while things in the Microsoft factory were going along smoothly, but it counted heaps when OneDrive seemed to throw a wobbly. It suddenly told us the storage space we pay for – a terabyte (don't ask: it's just lots) – was no longer there, and we must delete files forthwith or they would be frozen. There was no explanation.

At that point, you think the worst: hacked. And so, after painstakingly removing 140 gigs of files and storing them elsewhere, I began the tortuous process of contacting the company. There are buttons labelled "support" and "contact us", but they hide within a proliferation of others urging you, in effect, to make the company even richer.

Getting help began with tentative relationships with people trained to include in every sentence the words "valued client". Then there was a change of tone: my case would be prioritised, fixed within 24 to 48 hours. I was told the loss of storage should be ignored and was merely the result of work being done on the system by engineers. What work? Why? For reasons of security, dear client, those are things you may not know.

It did get fixed, eventually. Meantime, I deleted as many extraneous accounts as I could find, so we may be down to just one, although it's impossible to be sure. I got a note from someone who may actually work at Microsoft in America, thanking me warmly for my diligence. No doubt he's as keen as the rest of us to get Bill back to number one.