

## **Paying Your Bills Online**

Like a visit to the dentist, no one looks forward to paying bills. But why prolong the pain when you can pay them online in the time it takes to brew a cup of coffee?

Isobel Warren, a writer and editor based in Newmarket, Ont., has been paying bills with a click of her mouse for almost two years. "Twice a month I log on, pay bills and log out, all in about seven minutes," she says. "People think you have to be technologically savvy to do it, but once you're set up, nothing could be simpler."

### **Pay bills through online banking**

The first step is signing up for online banking with your financial institution. Once you're registered, log on to your main page where you'll find a snapshot of all of your account balances and investments. Click on Pay Bills for a list of payees, including utilities, telecoms, municipalities and major retailers. Begin registering all your payees by selecting them from the list and entering your customer ID or account number from a recent bill. Once you've compiled your personal list of payees, you're ready to start paying them electronically.

The next time you receive a bill, log on to your banking site, select the payee from your list, enter the amount you want to pay and choose the bank account you'd like to make the payment from. Payments reach the billing company the next business day, but it's a good idea to pay a few days in advance of the due date. You can also post-date a payment or set up automatic payments by entering the amount you'd like to pay and then selecting a time frame from the options available. It can be a one-time-only payment or regular weekly, biweekly, monthly or quarterly payments. It's all up to you.

### **Keep track of payments**

Once you're paying bills online, you'll need to keep track of all your payments. Online banking sites allow you to see your billing history and can copy transactions directly into accounting software, like Money or Quicken. You can also set up a Word document or Excel spreadsheet to record transactions as you complete them. Include the bill details such as the date, amount, payee and confirmation number. For an added measure of security, you can password-protect the document as well. Go to Tools > Options. Click the Security tab and enter your password.

Or, follow the example of Toronto businessman Ari Elo, who prints out every transaction and staples it to the original bill. At tax time, Elo can pull one file "and I can see every transaction I made throughout the year, all in one place."

### **Assess other bill-paying options**

Many companies, like Bell Canada and Rogers Communications, allow customers to pay their bills through their websites.

A similar service is offered by [epost](#), a joint venture of Canada Post, Bank of Montreal and TELUS, where close to 400,000 Canadians receive hundreds of thousands of pieces of mail, including bills, in virtual mailboxes. "It's a nice complement to online banking," says epost spokesperson Sarah Frame, "allowing customers to receive, store, organize and pay bills in one place. It also helps reduce the 70 pounds of paper the average Canadian household receives each year."

Epost allows you to receive mail at your online banking site or in your epost virtual mailbox. Once you receive your bills, you have the choice of paying them through the service via electronic funds transfer, credit card or online banking. The only downside? Epost's list of billing companies, while growing, is still incomplete.

### **Take your own security precautions**

"All the banks have invested heavily in ensuring their customers' financial data is protected," says Mohammed Nakhoda, spokesperson for the Canadian Bankers Association (CBA). "The system is safe and secure." What's more critical is that consumers learn how to protect their own privacy while online. Nakhoda suggests people take these precautions whenever they're banking online:

- Keep your password secret and change it regularly.
- Know whom you're dealing with at all times.
- Always ensure that you are in a secure environment. Look for the closed-lock or unbroken-key icon on your browser when entering sensitive data.
- Log out after paying bills at a public computer terminal.
- Disconnect from the Internet, or turn off your modem at home after paying bills.