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You Can Take It With You: The Portable Professional A Guide To The Latest, The Greatest, And The Smallest

by Wendy Gauntt

You've seen people using them, at the coffee shop, the airport, the office: an unbelievable array of new digital devices. The largest are not much thicker than a pad of paper; the smallest, no bigger than the palm of your hand. Many of these powerful little gadgets rival the processing power of colossal closet-size main-frame computers from the 1980s. But what do they do, and how can they help you?

PDAs

Personal digital assistants (PDAs) have been around for over a decade. About the size of a deck of cards, it synchronizes with your computer to provide up-to-date information in a convenient size. Think of these as electronic organizers that keep up with your contact list, calendar, to-do list and memos. Depending on the model, you can either synchronize email or retrieve it wirelessly.

These devices are great for storing information, but intensive data entry is best done back at your computer. Because of their diminutive size, your options are limited: you either write your data using a special modified handwriting style, or you navigate tictac-sized buttons on a miniscule keyboard. Not acceptable? Purchase a foldable keyboard and type normally.

The Palm has been around the longest, is most popular and has the most software applications, but the Pocket PC is another excellent choice, particularly if you wish to work with Microsoft Office files. The BlackBerry first arrived on the market solely to handle email, but it has since morphed into a full-fledged PDA.

Combo Devices

If your pager, phone and PDA are weighing down your belt or your purse, a combination

device may be right for you: in one convenient gadget, you get all three functions. The Treo 600 is the latest gotta-have gadget, combining a Palm PDA with wireless Internet and email, a miniature keyboard and a cell phone. Similarly-equipped gadgets are available in Pocket PC and BlackBerry versions. Make sure it feels comfortable next to your ear—early models were so large people said it was like holding a fridge to your head.

If you buy one, get ready to read a lot of fine print. The biggest difficulty is not in choosing a device, it's in choosing a cellular plan to match. If you want to retrieve email or access the Internet, you'll need a data plan in addition to your normal talk-time plan. Usage is measured in kilobytes rather than minutes. Watch those overage charges—they can add up fast.

Ultra Portable Notebooks

If a PDA is not powerful enough to meet your needs, an ultra portable computer may be the answer. And why lug around an eight-pound laptop when you can buy a Sony VAIO X505 at less than two pounds? This full-featured laptop is a mere half-inch thick with an impressive four-hour battery life, and many manufacturers have similar offerings. Laptops this light carry a hefty price tag, but for some it will be well worth the extra cost.

Tablet PCs

Another lightweight alternative to a standard notebook is the tablet PC. These run a special version of Windows XP that recognizes "digital ink." In other words, you write on it with a special pen, and the computer translates your writing into neatly-typed text. When hooked up to a keyboard, it functions as a standard laptop. When used as a tablet, it is a great and unobtrusive way to take notes and not much different than writing on a pad of paper, but far more convenient. Like the ultra portables, it is

also lightweight, generally around three pounds, and has a four- to five-hour battery life.

Handwriting recognition is dictionary-based, so you don't have to use special handwriting or train the computer, but you may need to add unusual names to the dictionary. Translation from handwriting to text is very good, not perfect, but it is easy to review and correct translation errors.

Extras

While you're at it, don't forget to check out today's portable peripherals. Need to print out documents on the run? Get a miniature thermal printer, so slim that it will fit in your briefcase right alongside your laptop. Need to show a PowerPoint demonstration? The smallest projectors weigh less than 2 pounds and can be plugged into a notebook or a PDA. And if you have to share data across computers, don't forget a USB flash drive, a thumb-sized hard drive you can carry on your keychain.

Connecting On The Go

Most laptops now offer built-in wireless, but there are actually two options that allow Internet access. Wireless generally refers to a communications protocol known as 802.11b/g, which allows you to connect at wireless hotspots, now available at many locations from Starbucks to McDonalds to the airport. A second newer option is wireless access through the cell phone network, which allows access nearly anywhere.

Wireless hotspots work much like a cordless phone—your computer connects to a signal broadcast by a base station, otherwise known as a router, just like your cordless phone connects to a base station to transmit your phone signal. The biggest difference is that most wireless computers can connect with any base station, not just the one you have in your home.

Hotspots are popping up all over the place, at bookstores, coffee shops, city parks, hotels and conference centers, although some locations require a small payment or monthly service fee. But if you aren't near a hotspot, you can't get online.

Cellular wireless may not be as fast as hotspot access, but you can get online almost anywhere. It works like your cell phone—you simply dial in from wherever you happen to be.

Wireless PDAs connect this way, and with a special card from your cell phone provider, you can get the same access for your PC. As with the combo devices, you will have to buy a data plan in addition to your regular cell phone plan.

Trends

Devices will continue to get smaller, more powerful, and less expensive. The only constraints will be our eyes and our fingers—those tiny screens and miniature keyboards

can be frustrating. But if you need a portable solution, don't hesitate to take the plunge. For me, the tablet PC has been an incredible convenience and timesaver, and I'll buy a combo device when it's time to replace my cell phone. Everyone's needs are different: evaluate yours and see which gadgets are right for you.

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