

Tech Toys 2003: Tech Tools for a Smarter Office

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In 1965 Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel, noted that the capability of a square inch of computer circuitry doubled every year. At the time, Moore was measuring transistors – the technology behind the transistor radio -- and the rate of technological change has slowed a bit since 1965. But Moore's Law still holds: every eighteen months, we'll see a new generation of computers. And these new computers drive new versions of software and accessories to take advantage of increased computing power.

Computer users are used to this rapid rate of change: by the time you get used to your new computer, a faster computer is available. New software and accessories appear even more frequently. Thousands of computer products debut each year, and many become obsolete within less than a year.

Some gadget lovers try to surf the leading wave of Moore's Law, buying new computers and new "tech toys" to go with them every 18-24 months. But most business users don't have the luxury of an unlimited technology budget. If we want new hardware or software that isn't in our organization's tech plan, we need to be able to make the business case for the purchase. For this article, we looked for technology that lets you do your job more easily and that has four additional characteristics: easy installation, longevity, product support, and a cost that can be easily defended in your office budget. Our results include both established technology with a large existing user base and newer hardware with all the signs of a promising future.

Here's My Card

What do you do with the stacks of business cards you and your co-workers collect at business meetings, trade shows, networking lunches, and the IAAP convention? In most offices, business cards are rubber-banded into submission and stuffed in a drawer until someone has time to enter them in a contact management software system. CardScan scanners are designed to scan business cards, separate the contact information into the appropriate fields, and export the contact information from the card to Outlook, Goldmine, ACT, and other popular software packages. Within a matter of minutes you can turn business cards into useable contact information -- and free up six square inches of desk or drawer space!



CardScan scanners are affordable and easy to install and use. The CardScan Executive (\$165 list price) includes a black and white scanner and software for one user and you can purchase additional software

licenses so other users in your office can use the scanner.

The bottom line: It's the Information Age, when knowledge is power. If you have business cards lying in drawers gathering dust, a CardScan is the tool you need to convert dust bunnies into business opportunities.

CardScan: www.cardscan.com

Getting Organized with PDAs

Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) are the electronic equivalents of DayTimers or Franklin Planners. With a PDA, you synchronize the calendar, task list, and contact information from your personal information management software such as Outlook and carry the PDA when you're out of the office. If you use Outlook at home and at the office, you can use a PDA to keep both copies of your Outlook information synchronized. PDAs aren't new technology: Palms, Handspring Visors, and Pocket PCs have become a familiar part of the office landscape. And yet, many admins still don't own or use PDAs.



There are two broad types of PDAs, and like PCs and Mac computers, the difference between the two types is the operating system PDAs are designed to use. Palm and Handspring PDA use the Palm operating system. PDAs built by HP (including the iPaq), Toshiba, and a host of other manufacturers use a version of Windows and are called PocketPCs. The PocketPC operating system includes versions of Word, Excel, and Outlook, so you can create, read, and edit Office documents on a PocketPC.



If price were unimportant, most users would buy a PocketPC. However, the least expensive PocketPCs list for \$300. You can find the low-end Palm PDAs on sale for around \$120.

The bottom line: If you maintain a software calendar or contact management system at work or home *and* you enter the same information in a planner so you can access your information on the road, you should replace the planner with a PDA. If you want to access Word and Excel documents on the road, look at PocketPCs. If your primary concerns are contacts, calendar, and tasks, a Palm PDA is a good solution.

Palm devices: www.palm.com.

PocketPCs: www.microsoft.com/mobile

PDAs and accessories: www.mobileplanet.com

Goodbye Floppy, Hello CD

If you don't have a CDRW drive, you don't know what you are missing. When we talked about purchasing a CDRW drive (also known as a "CD burner") for our office our discussion focused on the durability of CDs. If we could create CDs, it would be easy to send files by snail mail to customers and staff who were not on our network. We never thought that this hardware purchase would dramatically change the quality of our work.

A CD burner can change the quality of your work because it encourages you to "live large". You need over four hundred floppy disks or seven Zip disks to hold the information you can store on one CD. This comparison is accurate, but relatively meaningless because no one willingly sits in front of their floppy drive and swaps disks four hundred times. Even seven Zip disk changes is an excessive number of swaps. Instead, we spend time on triage, deciding which files are critical, discarding those that might have also have value.

With a CD burner you can drag and drop entire folders and take them on the road, so all the information you might need is available. With a CD burner you can create backups easily, and safely archive unused files that would otherwise take up space on your hard drive. Rather than cull image files to conserve drive space, put them on CD for easy use in the future.

You can purchase rewritable CD disks as well, allowing you to use CD disks like floppies. But with the low cost of CDRW disks, there's little reason to reuse them. If you no longer need the data on the disk, simply discard it. (Make sure you comply with your organization's policies on protecting and destroying confidential data.) Or, you can collect used CDs, drill holes in the top and bottom edges, and string them together with fishing line to make an attractive mobile.

When you purchase a new computer, substituting a CDRW drive for a plain vanilla CD drive (or a CD/DVD drive) usually increases the cost of a computer by less than \$50. Or, you can add a CDRW drive, either internal or external, or an existing system. A number of manufacturers build CDRW drives.

The bottom line: If you need portable data or a great way to archive data, look at CDRW drives. Some external drives work better than others with specific computer systems. When purchasing an external drive, make sure that it includes drivers for your version of Windows. If you have trouble getting the drive to work consistently with your computer, return it and choose a drive from a different manufacturer.

**Hewlett-Packard CDRW drives: www.hp.com
Iomega CDRW drives: www.iomega.com**

Sony CDRW drives: www.sony.com
Yamaha CDRW drives: www.yamaha.com

Goodbye Floppy, Hello USB Drive

USB drives (also called “pen drives”) make it easy to transfer data from one computer to another. USB drives are flash memory drives (the same storage technology used in digital cameras and PDAs) that read and write through your computer’s USB port. Although a USB drive looks nothing like a traditional drive, when you plug the USB drive into the USB port Windows recognizes it as another drive and assigns it a drive letter.

USB drives are small enough to hang on a key chain, and are available in many different storage sizes. With a USB drive, you don’t care which drive is in your notebook’s swappable drive bay because USB drives don’t take the place or port for an existing drive. Smaller USB drives (32 mb) cost slightly more than a dollar per megabyte – the storage capacity of two dozen floppies on a drive the size of a pack of chewing gum.



The bottom line: Use a USB drive when you frequently need to move data between computers that aren’t networked, or want to make data mobile and drive independent. There are a number of companies manufacturing USB drives. When shopping, compare capacity (measured in mb) and access speed (measured in ms). If you need to transport voice or music files, look at the new USB drive/MP3 player combinations.

EasyDisk USB drive: www.easydisk.com
Pen Drive Store: <http://www.pendrivestore.com/>
or look for “USB drive” in your favorite search site

Controlling the Appearance of Web Documents

Sometimes you need to control a document’s appearance so that it retains its look and feel even after it leaves your office. You want specific information to appear on each page, and graphics to be properly placed. If you send a Word document, it will be subtly reformatted when it is opened on a recipient’s machine. For example, a fifty-page Word document will print on fifty sheets of paper for some recipients, but others will print 48 or 52 pages. All will have the same content, but the pages will break in different places. If each recipient brings their version of the printed document to a meeting, the page numbering is relatively useless.

Another issue with document attachments is security. If you send an invoice in Word, the recipient can change the invoice, perhaps accidentally. Even if the document is sent as read-only, the recipient can make changes and save the changes with a different name.

Adobe Acrobat solves the problems of document security and document appearance. Acrobat installs as a printer, so creating an Acrobat file is as easy as printing. Instead of choosing a printer, you enter a file name and any other properties. The resulting PDF file can be password protected so it can't be altered. Other options include a view-only mode, where recipients can view the document on screen but not print the document. Acrobat files are viewed in a browser, and can be posted on web sites. (The handouts from IAAP workshops on our web site are all PDF files.)

The PDF format is an established format for file display and supported by almost all Internet browsers. Recipients can download the free Acrobat Reader from the Adobe web site. The Acrobat Suite costs less than \$250 and provides an inexpensive way to send unalterable documents that look just like they're supposed to.

The bottom line: If you need to manage document look and feel or send documents that can't be altered, you need Adobe Acrobat.

Adobe Acrobat: www.adobe.com

Getting the Picture

No article on useful technology would be complete without mentioning digital cameras. Digital images (and digital video) are widely used to provide content and context for PowerPoint presentations, web sites, newsletters, and other documents. When we create a presentation for a new client, we always include pictures from their site – a subtle way to say “We know your business.” And organizational newsletters are almost always improved with a few images.

There is no single “best” digital camera. There are a number of factors to consider when purchasing a camera, including:

Cost: There are no cheap digital cameras that will make an image look good in print. If you need high quality images, invest in a high resolution, high quality camera. However, even a relatively low resolution image looks great in PowerPoint and on web sites.

Media: Some digital cameras, like Sony's Mavica, record on floppy drive or CD. This is ideal if you want to give images to others on site – for example, to take pictures at a chapter event and hand them to the participant. Other cameras use some type of flash media. Choose a media type that has longevity so that the media will be supported in

other devices for at least the next few years. Currently the clear winners are SmartMedia, Compact Flash, and SD (Smart Digital).

File Format: Choose a camera that saves images in a common format like JPEG or TIF. Avoid cameras that require special software to open the images.

Size: If you travel, size and weight are important considerations. Digital cameras belong in carry-on luggage, not in your checked bag. Airlines aren't liable for damage to electronic equipment in checked luggage, and cameras are easily damaged.

The bottom line: Digital cameras are affordable and easy to use to add content to presentations and documents. Before purchasing, decide how you would use images captured with the camera. Check product reviews online

Digital Camera Reviews (high-end): www.dpreview.com
Digital Camera Reviews (general): www.dcresource.com
Digital Camera Reviews (general): www.imaging-resource.com