

Tech Tools 2004 for a Smarter Office

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For this guide, 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. CardScan scanners are affordable and easy to install and use. The CardScan Executive (\$199-249 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; Targus: www.targus.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. 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 coop'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

Goodbye Floppy, Hello USB Drive

USB 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.

Pen Drive Store: <http://www.pendrivestore.com/>
Buy.com always has great prices on USB Drives: www.buy.com

Connect Multiple USB Devices

USB hubs come in all shapes and sizes and are a great way to connect multiple USB devices to one computer. For a laptop, you can get several types of mini-hubs. For a desktop, you can get a larger multiple port hub. Either way, they save lots of time and energy connecting devices to the back of a computer and make connecting and disconnecting a snap.

Everything USB: <http://www.everythingusb.com>
www.MobilePlanet.com has a selection of hubs and other mobile devices

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 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. 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.imaging-resource.com

Making Your Point

PowerPoint presentations don't need to chain you or your exec to the computer. Free yourself from the keyboard and mouse so you can get "up close and personal" with your audience. With the new cordless infrared pointing devices you can wander away from your laptop yet still keep your presentation rolling. The devices vary in features and power (distance) but most include slide forward, slide back and slide hide features, along with a laser pointer. They connect to your laptop through a small USB receiver.



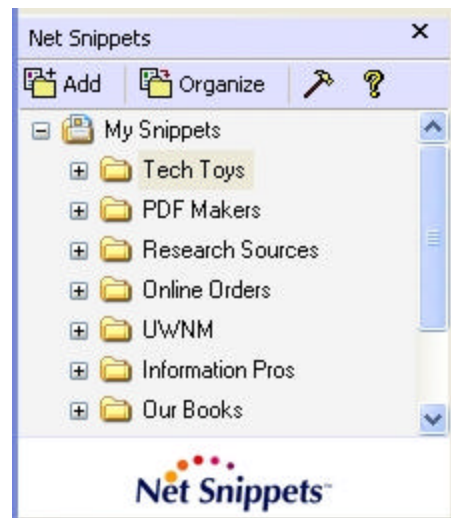
While you are thinking wireless, don't forget wireless keyboards. With wireless mouse/keyboard combos, you can speak from a podium or across the room and use the keyboard and mouse to control your computer. Never worry again about whether the cable will be long enough or where the projector is set up.



Power Presenter RF: www.presentationteam.com
Remote Presenter: www.interlinkelec.com
Wireless keyboards: www.logitech.com

Capturing Web Searches

If you spend any time on the Web, you know how frustrating it can be to find a page you visited earlier. Bookmarks and Favorites are great if you can remember the name of the site to begin with. With Net Snippets software, you can capture links, pages, parts of pages, pdfs, and images and save them in organized folders right in your browser. And better yet, Net Snippets automatically captures the source so you always know where you found the material. Net Snippets also produces great-looking summary reports of your Web research automatically.



Net Snippets: www.netsnippets.com