

Personal Digital Assistants - PDAs

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If you always seem to be “on the move”, need to be able to work whilst out of the office, but don’t want to carry a laptop or notebook computer with you, a PDA might be the answer.

Our E-Business Advisers discuss these pocket-sized pieces of technology:

1. What are PDAs?

A Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) acts as an electronic organiser, with many other features.

They are very portable, straightforward to use, and you can share information with your PC when you’re back in the office. You should think of PDAs as an extension of your computer, not a replacement.

PDAs are also known as handhelds or palmtops.

Not only can they manage your personal information, such as contacts, appointments, and to-do lists, you can also use some of them to connect to the Internet, run multimedia software, or even use some of them as a mobile phone too (see “Smartphones” Fact Sheet in this series for more information).

Other typical uses for a PDA are:

- Storing contact names and addresses
- Preparing your to-do lists
- Schedule appointments - and integrate these

back into your office systems when back at base

- Track expenses
- Take notes
- Use as an advanced calculator
- Sharing and swapping data with other PDA users

On some models of PDAs you can also:

- Browse the web
- Send and receive emails
- Word Process
- Use Spreadsheets
- Record Voice Memos
- Play MP3 music files
- Play computer games
- Add features like cameras, GPS systems, barcode scanners etc

2. Operating systems:

There are two main competing operating systems - Microsoft Pocket PC and Palm Operating System (Palm OS).

Microsoft Pocket PC based systems run an

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operating system that closely resembles Microsoft Windows.

You can run "Pocket" applications similar to Microsoft products such as Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Money, browse the web and send and receive emails.

As you would expect, they are very easy to integrate back into Microsoft products when you're back in the office.

Palm OS based systems run simple and effective applications such as address books and schedulers etc.

There are also over 20,000 free and low cost applications that can be downloaded from the web that can be used for a wide range of purposes - everything from city maps of many UK, mainland European and US cities, to powerful financial calculations software.

Palm OS devices tend to be somewhat cheaper than Microsoft pocket PC devices.

Palm OS devices data can also be integrated back into you PC systems when back in the office.

Irrespective of which OS you choose, you need to be able to integrate your data between your PDA and office computer.

As PDAs are meant to work in conjunction with your office PC, you need to be able to work with the same information on both pieces of equipment.

For example, if you book an appointment on your desktop computer, you will need to transfer it onto your PDA, and vice versa.

Special synchronization ("sync") software on your PDA works with software that you install on your PC to easily achieve this. This PC sync software comes with the PDA when you purchase it.

Another advantage of sync-ing your two machines is that if your PDA is broken, lost or stolen, you'll always have a backup on your PC.

3. Choosing your PDA:

If you are choosing your first PDA, your choice of operating system (OS) is likely to be important.

- If everybody in your firm uses one type of OS, you probably should buy the same OS type for the sake of compatibility.
- It's important that you check on the software you will need to run on your PDA. Some software some might only work with one OS.

You should also consider:

- How easy to use do you find each PDA you try?
- Size & weight. This may be important to you if you will be carrying your PDA around all day. Ultra slim & lightweight models are available.
- Memory – If you want to run a number of applications on a Microsoft Pocket PC, you will need to have adequate memory. The general rule is - "the more, the better!"
- Screen – Look for a screen that you find easy to read: most PDAs now have colour screens.



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- What's the battery life? You may need to be able to work for a long time period without being able to recharge the PDA, (for example if travelling). Colour displays tend to use more battery power.
- Can you expand the PDA? Most modern PDAs have expansion slots built in, so you can add additional storage/memory cards, networking cards etc.
- Will you need other accessories such as additional keyboards or MP3 players etc?
- Will you need to be able to connect your PDA to other devices - e.g. via Wi-Fi and Bluetooth.

Are there cards that you can add to your PDA that will allow this? (See "Bluetooth" and "Wi-Fi - Wireless Fidelity" Fact Sheets in this series)

- Will you need your PDA to also act as a mobile phone? If so, see the "Smartphones" Fact Sheet in this series.

4. Useful Links:

www.mobiletechreview.com - USA based web site, with reviews on a whole range of PDA devices

www.pdabuzz.com - UK based web site, with reviews on a whole range of PDA devices and an online shop

www.palmgear.com - Add-on programs and accessories for Palm OS PDAs

Disclaimer: we have no commercial links with these companies, and their appearance in this fact sheet is not an endorsement.