

Clever, and good looking too

Is it time to have an affair with a personal digital assistant?

In the Eighties, the hip organiser of choice was the Filofax. Since the nineties and even more so in the early "noughties", it's the personal digital assistant (or PDA). They are an electronic address book, diary and task list all in one.

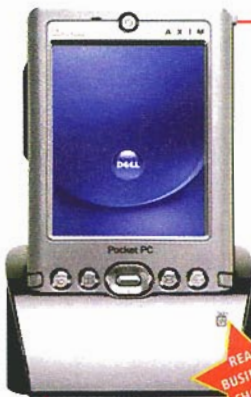
PDA's are getting powerful and it's now common to include digital dictaphones, colour screens, MP3 players, word processing, spreadsheets, digital cameras, and software that can do everything from satellite navigation to computer games. By syncing up to your main computer PDA's can provide a portable replica of your working environment.

There are two popular operating systems for PDA's: Palm OS and Microsoft's PocketPC.

If the idea of a PDA is tantalising but also a bit scary, you can start small. The Palm Zire costs a mere £50 and has the same basic functionality as much more expensive systems. For the price of a good umbrella you can see if PDA's are going to work for you. Be prepared to put in a few hours to learn how to use it properly.

Assuming that you're ready to take plunge a bit deeper, I looked at three all-singing-all, dancing PDA's.

First there is the Sony Clie PEG-NX73 (£338). As you'd expect from Sony, it adds sounds and video to the normal PDA options. Building on Palm's OS5, it has a neat but low-resolution digital camera and a very good screen. It can play back pictures, movies and audio files that are stored on a removable Memory Stick. It comes with software to view Powerpoint, Excel and Word files, but to edit them you'll need Documents to Go (£20 from www.dataviz.com). It has Bluetooth which means if you have a suitably-equipped mobile phone you can connect to the Internet and can synchronise with a desktop PC without wires. It's very expandable



Dell Axim X3

Likes

- ✓ Good value.
- ✓ Lots of power for the money.

Dislikes

- ✗ Not much extra software.
- ✗ Security issues connecting to a wireless network.
- ✗ Dodgy design.

www.dell.co.uk



Sony Clie PEG-NX73

Likes

- ✓ James Bond would approve.
- ✓ Camera and music playback.
- ✓ Lots of functionality.

Dislikes

- ✗ Keyboard isn't very usable.
- ✗ Sony software can be fiddly.
- ✗ Expensive.

www.sony.co.uk



HP iPAQ Pocket PC h5500

Likes

- ✓ Security assured.
- ✓ Bluetooth and Wi-Fi.
- ✓ Lots of memory (128MB).

Dislikes

- ✗ Expensive.
- ✗ A bit big and heavy.

www.hp.com

with a Memory Stick slot and a CompactFlash card slot which can take a wireless network card or extra memory. The most striking thing about the Sony is its flexible design. In one mode it looks like a regular PDA with the screen on top, in another it opens up like a book to reveal a keyboard and the hinge rotates to reveal the camera. It works very well, even if you do get the feeling that they are just showing off.

HP's iPAQ Pocket PC h5500 (£415) is all about business. It has more memory, better communications and a faster processor than its rivals – and it has better security. Starting with a discrete fingerprint scanner and ending with encryption software, it is a safer repository of your business secrets than any other PDA. Like all other PocketPCs, the standard Microsoft software is comprehensive: pocket versions of Word, Excel and Outlook plus Windows media player.

Best of all, the iPAQ includes wireless networking for accessing the internet and corporate networks and Bluetooth for hooking up to printers, phones and desktops without wires.

Lastly, there is the Dell X3. It comes with very little extra software or frills, but it is relatively small and light. The removable battery is a plus as is the bright screen, and the price is competitive. The entry model starts at £139 with a more powerful version for £189. I tested the top model (£220) which comes with built-in Wi-Fi networking. Although more expensive, Wi-Fi functionality is useful for browsing the internet and picking up e-mail. With a subscription service (such as www.boingo.com) it is possible to use it in public hotspots like Café Nero on the Fulham Road. It's a lot of PDA for the money.

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