

Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs): Toy or Necessity?
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Imagine...

- ...being able to find your contacts' phone numbers, addresses, and emails, instantly, anytime
- ...having your calendar always available – not just this year's, but many years in the past and future
- ...hearing an automatic reminder for your appointments the day, hour, and/or minute before
- ...never having to hunt for a scrap of paper with an important note on it
- ...creating, prioritizing, and checking off "to-do's" quickly and easily
- ...tracking your expenses the stress-free way
- ...reading the morning news, joke-of-the-day, and your emails while riding on the train or waiting in line at the store

A PDA (or “handheld”) promises all this and more! But, is it for you? How do you know if you need one?

The PDA (you may recognize the brand names Palm™ Pilot, Handspring, iPAQ, Pocket PC, and others) is an electronic organizer and mini-computer. Regardless of the brand, most PDAs come with:

- Address Book (standard info plus room to customize and add notes)
- Calendar (you can schedule appointments, reminders, birthdays, anniversaries, events, etc.)
- Memos (you can set an alarm to remind you)
- Calculator (no need to carry around an extra)
- To-Do List (you can prioritize your tasks and check them off as you do them)
- Expense Tracker (great for the self-employed)
- Ability to download stuff from the Web

Entering information into your handheld is done one of two ways: using a small attached or detachable keyboard, or using strokes with a stylus ("pen") right on the screen. The latter method offers two options: You can pull up an electronic keyboard and tap the characters out, or you can “write” with the stylus (in a language called Graffiti®) on the screen in the input area. Graffiti® takes a bit of practice, but eventually becomes second nature.

With PDAs, there's limited worry about losing data, or even losing the PDA itself, because all the data is easily backed up on your main computer. "Synchronizing," as it's called, is the process of backing up your latest information on both your PDA and on your main computer. So, you get the same information stored in 2 places. And it's easy to do. Your PDA comes with a cradle, which connects to your computer via a cable; you place your PDA in the cradle and press the button. (Some models come with a synchronizing cable without the cradle.) There are two ways to access your data on your regular computer: you can load software that comes with your PDA, or you can use other, more common programs such as Microsoft Outlook.

Why is this so wonderful? It all comes down to portability. You can always enter important information into your computer while you're next to it and it's booted up, but you can enter that same information into your PDA anywhere, anytime, sans the wait for booting. Then, when you synchronize, new information replaces outdated information, and you have data stored in 2 places.

What's good about PDAs

PDAs are relatively inexpensive; many new models cost you between \$100 and \$200, and of course higher depending on the bells and whistles you buy with it. (A PDA with a color screen starts at about \$300.)

What is nice about these computers is that they are small and lightweight -- totally totable! And, PDAs, since they're limited in functionality, are easier to use than larger computers. But if you do have a problem, you can easily get tech support. To me, the best thing about a handheld is security: you can back up information with it. For others, convenience is key. Both, in my opinion, make it well worth the cost.

Inevitables

PDAs can't do as much as your desktop or laptop. Their functionality and data storage capacity are limited, but still rather impressive. They're designed as an adjunct to, not a replacement for, your regular computer. However, should you need information when you're away from your office/home computer, or should your computer crash or need to be sent in for repairs, you can use your handheld for the important stuff.

Depending on the type you get, you may have to replace batteries in your PDA quite often. And if you wait too long and your batteries die, you will lose all data on it. (You will NOT lose programs, just your data.) This is terrible only if you don't back up your data; so it's important to synchronize on a regular basis (ideally once a day at least).

Like regular computers, PDAs are becoming more and more advanced, and models from a couple of years ago are pretty outdated. In order to run the latest software, you should look for the latest operating system (OS). As of this writing, the latest OS for Palm™ is 5, and for the Pocket PC, 2002.

Since these computers are so small, they are easy to lose. They're also a hot item for thieves, and they are easy to sit on. So it's important to be a careful owner.

What else can a PDA do?

PDAs, like regular computers, run software that you can use for work or fun. However, the software you buy must be compatible with your PDA operating system (for example, your regular word processing program cannot be loaded on your PDA, but you can get word processing software made especially for the PDA). There are thousands of programs available for the PDA. Most are available for purchase online, and some are available at computer stores.

Your PDA can accept downloads from the Internet and, often, from your email program. Hundreds of web sites allow PDA downloads, including NYTimes.com, msn.com (mobile channel), and USA Today.com. You can even download directions from MapQuest.com onto your PDA. If you're interested in downloading information from the Internet to your PDA, visit www.avantgo.com to learn more.

You can also buy cool all-in-ones like a cell phone PDA or digital camera PDA; see _____ for some available options. (SIDEBAR B)

PDAs and the Dietitian

In the dietetics field, PDAs are often used as a companion to larger systems. Nutrition-related businesses have integrated PDA software with their main software to make many tasks super-convenient. Dietitians use PDAs for:

- bedside menu entry in the inpatient setting
- food inventory management
- client/patient assessment
- client/patient tracking
- 24-hour recalls and food records

After using the PDA for a task, the data get transferred to a larger computer, adding to the main data pool.

There are three main types of dietetics applications for your handheld. The first type is simply a "standalone" and does not depend on a larger system. In general, such applications do not store customized data, but are tools for the profession. For example, the application may calculate calorie needs, nutrient needs, ideal body weight, and other clinical calculations. The second type is a read-only database, like food-drug interactions and nutrient composition of foods. With these products, you can look things up but not change anything. The third type is an integrated program, where you can actually store information and change data as needed. The third type is the most expensive, and may or may not come with a partner program for your regular computer for synchronization.

PDAs can even help with client/patient adherence. If you're in private practice, you can encourage your clients to use a free or inexpensive PDA application to track their food logs or recipes. Because this is more fun than writing things down, it may help them comply with their diet regimen.

Where can you learn about and buy this software? Check out the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* and other nutrition-related publications for advertisements; do a web search (see web resources below); and ask other dietitians what they've heard about or use for themselves. See Table 1 for a listing of nutrition software for the PDA.

Downloading from the Web: What you should know

Another thing that makes PDAs so convenient is that you can usually download software from the Internet; no CD or disk required! Once you find what you want, go to the corresponding web site and in a few minutes you'll be the proud owner of new software. In general, here is how this works: using your regular computer, go to the website of the product you want. Click on "download." Double-click on the installation

file you just downloaded. Follow the instructions (usually you just click "next" a bunch of times). Synchronise with your handheld. Register (pay). Enter the serial number you received during the registration process into the program. Congratulations! It's ready to use.

Finding the PDA that's right for you: Resources

You can get accurate and detailed information about PDAs, including product comparisons, at cnet.com. You can then find the best price for the one you want by doing availability and cost comparisons cnet.com, mysimon.com, nextag.com, and dealttime.com, to name a few. The basic differences include color versus monochromatic screen; expandability options (memory, modem, etc.), wireless internet access, and other features. Everything you've always wanted to know about PDAs can be found at cnet.com, memoware.com, palmblvd.com, and palmpilotfiles.com. Do your homework, and you'll figure out what's best for you. To find software, visit (again) cnet.com, healthypalmpilot.com, palmgear.com, and handango.com.

A PDA might not be for you if you:

- keep track of things in your head successfully;
- need your calendar and rolodex only when you're at work;
- need no technological enhancements in your work;
- are perfectly content with a paper-based system, and couldn't imagine it getting better.

If you're thinking that not many people fall into all of these categories, you're right: that explains why PDAs are so popular, with millions sold in the US over the last 5 years.

(Please note: there are 2 main operating systems [OS] for PDA's: Palm™ OS, and Pocket PC. Palm™ OS is used with Palm™ Pilot, Handspring, and many others, while Pocket PC is a Microsoft OS. Graffiti® is the official text input system of Palm™ OS. When choosing a product, it is a good idea to figure out in advance what software you'll want for it, and see if that software is available for the OS that you're interested in.)

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