

Pcs for a shrinking market

Out of the office I work on a portable PC, whether at home or on the road. Over the years, I have moved towards lighter and smaller, or at least thinner, laptops.

All my favourites run Microsoft Windows XP or Vista, weigh less than 3lb, and have screens in the 10in to 12.5in range. Crucially, all are wireless-enabled, come with full Qwerty-style keyboards and can run all my office productivity applications as well as my home office and personal entertainment software. But recently a new category of ultra mobile PCs (UMPCs) has emerged.

Some of these, such as the OQO Model 02 (www.oqo.com), Sony's Vaio UX1XN (www.sony.com) and the new FlipStart E1001S from Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen's FlipStart Labs (www.flipstart.com), are small enough to fit in a largish pocket.

The OQO and Sony machines both feature screens that slide up to reveal mini Qwerty keyboards, while the FlipStart has a "clamshell" design with a 5.6in, 1,024-by-600 pixel high resolution display that lifts up to reveal its BlackBerry-style Qwerty keypad. All three run the full version of Microsoft Windows XP or Windows Vista, weigh between 1lb and 2lb and have 4-6in screens. Some others are equipped with a Tin touchscreen and a slate-style format running Microsoft Windows XP Tablet Edition, such as the Samsung Q1B (www.samsung.com).

But are these mini-marvels serious business tools or overpriced niche products?

I prefer to carry a laptop with a full-sized or nearly full-sized keyboard, but in certain circumstances an ultra-mobile like the OQO, which weighs just 1lb, may be the way to go. For instance, I took an OQO Model 01 on a backpacking holiday to central America and used it to download and edit photographs I had taken while diving. It was also fine for checking e-mail wherever there was a Wi-Fi wireless networking connection. With its built-in cellular wireless card, the improved Model 02 extends this connectivity to anywhere with a mobile network.

The FlipStart, just launched in

the US, also comes with a range of connectivity options including Wi-Fi, built-in cellular wireless card and Bluetooth short-range networking.

I have been testing the FlipStart, which costs \$1,999 and is only available so far in the US, along with Samsung's Q1B which costs \$1,000. Although both classified as ultra-portables, the two devices are quite different. The FlipStart is like a shrunken version of a conventional clamshell notebook, 6in by 4.5in and 1.6in thick, making it a bit bulky and heavy, at 1.5lb, for

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a jacket pocket (it comes with a shoulder bag that also carries its power supply).

While the keypad is too small for touch-typing, the keyboard, unlike most of its competitors, boasts a full set of alphanumeric keys and symbols in standard layout. It is easier to type using thumbs, BlackBerry style, which is fine for e-mail and short documents. For anything longer, you will want to use an

N800: elegant, pocket-sized and affordable

If you want an elegant, low-cost device designed primarily for web browsing and basic tasks like e-mail, Nokia's new N800 Internet Tablet should be on your shortlist.

This Linux-powered pocket-sized device is an updated and significantly improved version of the N770, which the Finnish mobile phone maker launched in 2005. Sadly there is still a limited choice of third-party software for such portable Linux-based devices, but the N800 does what it was designed to do very well.

It slips easily into a jacket pocket, comes with a bright 800x480 pixel resolution 4.1in

external Bluetooth or USB (universal serial bus) keyboard.

However, the FlipStart does have useful keyboard shortcuts and navigation keys, such as a dedicated key for access to an onscreen menu of frequently used programs such as calendar, e-mail and web browser. There is also an extremely useful key to activate the "alt-control-delete" command and a screen magnification key. A mini touchpad or a mini joystick controls the screen and there is a dedicated four-way scroll pad, oddly positioned left and right "mouse" buttons and a side-mounted navigation wheel.

While the ultra-low voltage 1.1 GHz Intel Pentium M Processor and integrated Intel graphics move things along nicely, the unexpandable 512MB of memory and the shock-mounted 30Gb hard drive are meagre for the price.

There are, however, some nice touches, including a mini videocam built into the bottom edge of the flip-up display, and a 1.5in screen on the outside of the case that can be set up to display e-mail alerts, contact details or other useful data when the clamshell machine is closed.

The FlipStart also delivers good battery performance - up to six hours with the standard extended-life battery, or 2.5 hours with an optional ultra thin battery. Overall, the FlipStart is an impressive first effort at building a full-func-

screen and connects to the internet using either its built-in Wi-Fi wireless networking technology or by "pairing" it with a Bluetooth enabled mobile phone. I found both methods worked well and the Opera 8 web browser that comes with the device is a pleasure to use.

Like its predecessor, the NSOO's interface is pretty simple - most of the time you use the touchscreen and a rather good stylus for navigation. The battery pack delivers a minimum of about four hours of operation per charge and best of all, the N800 costs just \$399.

tion ultra-mobile PC without making too many compromises. At this price, however, I doubt whether it will be a big seller.

In contrast, the Samsung Q1B seems to be aimed much more at the broader consumer market, both in features and price.

Like the other members of the "Q" family of UMPCs launched by Samsung over the past 18 months, the Q1B is a mini-tablet PC and the sort of device you might use while in front of the TV to view a website or as a media player while commuting. Its most striking feature is the touch-sensitive Tin screen surrounded by a shiny piano-black bezel. Despite its large screen the Samsung Q1B, which measures 9in by 5.5in and is 1in thick, is light and comfortable to hold - unlike the thin, plastic stylus that feels unworthy of a \$1,000 device. The Q1B is built around a 1GHz Via ultra-low voltage processor, a 40Mb hard drive and 512MB of memory, which together deliver reasonable performance without generating too much heat.

Battery life is another plus for the Q1B. The standard removable lithium ion battery pack provides up to five hours of run time. The device also features Bluetooth and Wi-Fi wireless networking support. Although Windows Tablet Edition supports both an on-screen virtual keyboard and handwriting recognition, for extended text you really need to connect an external keyboard. Samsung plans to launch an ultra-mobile PC, the Q1 Ultra, later this month, featuring a thumb-operated Qwerty keypad with the keys on each side of the screen.

Overall, I enjoy using the Q1B for web browsing, viewing photos and as a portable digital multimedia player - both the screen resolution and audio quality through headphones are very good.

But I will continue to take a laptop with something like a full-sized keyboard on business trips. UMPCs are also likely to face competition from smartphone-style devices that will probably cost less and deliver more.

paul.taylor@ft.com
Paul Taylor tackles your high-tech problems and queries at www.ft.com/gadgetguru