

Obsolete computers that still do the job

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If your ancient IT equipment is sufficient for the task, don't hesitate to squeeze more years out of it during a crummy economy.

In January, for the tenth year in a row, I took my little Hewlett-Packard (HPQ) Jornada notebook to a trade show in Las Vegas. The tech industry gathers there annually for a confab, which these days happens to be at the Consumer Electronics Show (otherwise known as CES). As an industry analyst, I go to visit with clients and prospects as well as to see the latest technologies. And I like to take notes. The Jornada was a demo unit from a HP press event in Grenoble, France, in 1998.

As I fired up and snapped shut this highly reliable machine during a cascade of meetings, I was again struck by its practicality. Although dated by any definition, the old Jornada remains—year after year—exactly the right tool for the job at hand: taking notes in appointments scheduled one after another all day in venues scattered throughout the city.

Every time I open this device, I of course have to endure the mockery of my peers. But at the same time, I am struck by a number of principles.

Durability

One has to do with the longevity of technology. This device could easily remain in service for another decade. However, like the automobile industry before it, the computer business has gotten its customers on a cycle of planned obsolescence, which suits suppliers' requirement to continue to develop and sell technology whether we need it or not. Examples of this commercial imperative include Microsoft's (MSFT) replacement of Windows XP by Windows Vista, Intel's (INTC) repeated architectural changes, and the recent move by Sony (SNE) and others to substitute Blu-ray for older optical drive formats. O.K., so products are getting better in some ways. Yes, they've got more features. But they don't always become more reliable.

Another principle has to do with the definition of "good enough." With this term, it's important to know the context. What is something good enough for? Clearly, the Jornada's performance is severely compromised. But it has plenty of power for text. Indeed, from a writer's or reporter's point of view, computers have had enough power since the mid-1980s. This one has a 190MHz StrongARM processor. Admittedly, it lacks memory, boasting a mere 16MB RAM. But those 16 million bytes are more than enough for me to jot my notes.

Rather than a hard drive, the unit has 16MB of flash (a great luxury at the time it was made), which allows it to operate quickly, silently, and at low power. Because data displayed on the screen are actually written to flash, there's no need to save your work: It's automatically saved as you type. You're effectively looking at the saved copy all the time. The 8.2-in. display is barely in color, and fonts are primitive, but who needs acres of screen real estate, color, or fancy fonts for writing? The system runs on the very first version of Microsoft's Windows CE, a super lightweight OS, and word processing is provided by Pocket Word, also light as a butterfly.

Low power demand, big battery

The fact that I'm still using the Jornada is a testament to the durability of well-made technology products. Those Mars Rovers are still roving around out there, a lot longer than anyone expected. And what makes the Jornada really stand out has a lot to do with its longevity. It's got unbelievable battery life, the product of a big battery relative to the demands of its low-power components. The product literature claims that the Li-Ion

rechargeable battery gets 10 hours. But I juiced it up before getting on the plane, took notes for three days, flew home, and transferred the notes five days later, all without ever plugging it in again. And the battery gauge still showed 62% remaining (6.5-7.5 hours). The trick to making the two coin backup batteries last is taking them out and tossing them in the bag with the unit until next year. That way, they get maybe five years of life.

Another great boon of the ancient technology is that it's instant on—and I mean instant. None of this five-seconds stuff. It's blup! On. And blup! Off. A lot of the battery savings comes just from turning it off during short idle times, which instant-on makes practical. The keyboard is small but usable. And despite the relatively large battery, the unit is as light as a (big) paperback. What's not to love? It goes great in my backpack as I bicycle between appointments on the Strip and the show floor.

The Pocket Word transfer to a modern PC gets a little tougher each year, as the interfaces between the past and present grow progressively more twisted, but I still find pathways around. Speaking of which, the Jornada is not the only piece of old technology I've got in service. I'm still using a printer, also HP, circa 1992. That's 17 years. It, too, is slowly being marooned in the past by its connectors.

This year, as IT and financial managers wonder whether, given the economic situation, they can squeeze another year out of their existing client PCs, it's not a bad idea to revisit the principles of useful life. A good tool should last a long time.

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