

Do You Need a Personal Digital Assistant?

Once just a cool techie tool, the personal digital assistant (PDA) has become a necessity for many lawyers. But just what is a “personal digital assistant”? If the term is not familiar, perhaps you have heard of a Palm or Palm Pilot. Although Palm is a brand name of a particular line of PDAs and PDA operating system software, it has become almost as synonymous with PDA as Kleenex has with tissues.

A PDA enables you to have instant access to a multitude of important information and tools, including calendar, address book, tasks, notes, expense tracking, time recording, and much more. It is estimated that over 10,000 programs are available for the various PDAs. While some are free, shareware programs are available for a nominal charge, and others can cost anywhere from \$20 to \$100. The bottom line, however, is that a PDA can have a positive impact on your bottom line. It enables you to work smarter instead of harder, to make downtime billable or at least productive time, and to capture time or costs that might otherwise slip through the cracks.

Since the Palm OS is the most popular PDA on the market, there is increasing integration with leading case management, legal research, and time and billing packages. You can synchronize client contact and case data from Abacus, Amicus Attorney, and Time Matters. Westlaw’s new wireless clipping application allows you to find, download, and KeyCite your legal research. Timeslips and Timesolve provide Palm-based applications that you can use to keep up on time and expenses and then insert them into your desktop application.

Today’s PDAs are powerful and offer a variety of additional functions. For example, attachments such as headphones, memory sticks

or cards, and docking interfaces can add compatibility for playing MP3 music or taking digital photos. A full-size stowaway keyboard transforms the PDA into a mini laptop. You can utilize your downtime at the doctor’s office, airports, or even waiting for your case to come up in court by reading your e-mails, the newspaper, or your favorite book. By purchasing a PDA with wireless Internet capabilities, you open the communication doorway to e-mails, legal research, and even global positioning.

Visit www.pdaJD.com to find the best sites, add-ons, and capabilities for lawyers. This site lists articles, resources, product reviews, links to other helpful Web sites, and has a lot of other useful information – all for the legal professional.

How Do You Select the PDA That’s Right for You?

The first step should be to determine what desktop/network application software you want to link with the PDA and what operating system is required for the PDA to talk with the software. Most PDAs will link with Outlook, but if you are using case management software, be careful to find the proper PDA that works with the program you are using.

You can use two methods to input information on a PDA – a stylus or a keyboard. Using a stylus is fine for entering small amounts of text, but the keyboard is the answer to real document generation. Most keyboards easily attach to your PDA, and some, like the BlackBerry, have built-in keyboards.

If you just want a contact manager, any PDA will satisfy your need. When you are considering

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editing and distributing documents, using spreadsheets, or reviewing Microsoft PowerPoint presentations, your choices are reduced. Therefore, it is a good idea to determine what software you wish to use on your PDA to make sure it is available.

Determine whether you need Internet access from your PDA. If receiving and sending e-mail or accessing information over the Internet is important, you will need to include this option. Are you going to interface the PDA with your cell phone to access the Internet, or will you need a PDA that can access the Internet directly? Since most attorneys already have a cell phone, it makes sense to get a convergent device (CPDA), one that combines telephone and PDA capabilities in one device. The obvious advantage is carrying one piece of equipment instead of two. This device enables you to enter all your contact information (names, addresses, phone numbers) from your Outlook, case management, or relationship management software (e.g., Goldmine or ACT) and makes it available for the cell phone to use.

Battery life is critical with PDAs. You need to determine how often you think you will use your PDA to make sure the PDA you choose will meet that need. Some PDAs can perform for a month on a pair of AAA batteries; others barely last a day. Many PDAs contain internal rechargeable batteries and accessories allow recharging almost anywhere.

Other considerations include memory (get more), the size of the monitor, and whether you want a color or monochrome monitor (get color for easier viewing). The Palm operating system has become the standard for most PDAs; other than Palm, Handspring and Sony have a wide variety of models to choose from that use the Palm operating system. Additional optional features keep improving, and it is now common to include an MP3 player, pager, modem, GPS, and digital camera. Many high-end models include built-in recording and playback of MPEG-4 videos, built-in Bluetooth technology, a slot for a wireless LAN card, a charging cradle, or a USB connection for direct printing.

There is also the popular Microsoft Pocket PC operating system, which is available from Toshiba or HP/Compaq. Both come with color display and 32-Mb memory and work with Word, Excel, Outlook, and Windows Media Player. Options include a built-in microphone and digital voice recorder, Bluetooth card, USB-connected full-size keyboard, and integrated wireless LAN connectivity.

Is a Smartphone the Better Choice?

Demand for combination PDA/cell-phone devices – called smartphones – is rising sharply. There are still reasons you might consider a standard PDA without cell-phone capabilities. Smartphones are bulky compared with a regular

cell phone, yet their screens are usually not as large as those of regular PDAs. That makes a PDA generally better than a smartphone for working with spreadsheets, viewing Web pages, or displaying photos and video. PDAs have also made advances in usability to compete with the growing popularity of smartphones, adding more memory, faster processors, and greater multimedia functionality. If you don't need Internet connectivity, a PDA is a much better value than a smartphone.

Smartphones, as the name suggests, are something more than a cell phone. While most cell phones can hold contact data and some calendar information, smartphones include a full-fledged PDA. Prices for smartphones have been rising, as they add more multimedia features to compete with the iPhone. However, with careful shopping, rebates, and the willingness to commit to a service contract, some very capable smartphones remain relative bargains.

Smartphones require you to pay for data service as well as monthly cell phone charges, in addition to hardware costs. Total monthly wireless fees can easily cost over \$100, depending on the carrier. But the beauty of a smartphone is that it saves you from carrying as many as six different devices, potentially replacing a cell phone, PDA, digital camera, MP3 player, mini TV, and even a laptop.

Lawyers currently rate the Kyocera smartphone the highest. It works with Sprint and Verizon and uses the Palm operating system. Other features and options include an expansion memory slot, wireless fax and modem, color display, MP3 player, caller ID, voice dialing, hands-free speaker phone, GPS locator, and text messaging. It truly combines seamless integration of the PDA and cell phone in a sleek, lightweight piece of equipment with adequate battery life.

While including PDA applications (address book, calendar, to-do lists, etc.), as well as telephone capabilities on newer models, the BlackBerry is primarily known for its capability to send and receive e-mail wherever it can access a wireless network of certain cellular phone carriers. The BlackBerry has a built-in keyboard, optimized for “thumbing” (the use of only the thumbs to type). System navigation is primarily accomplished by a scroll ball in the middle of the device. Some models also incorporate a push-to-talk feature, similar to a two-way radio.

Apple's latest iPhone includes new software that adds Microsoft Exchange support for business and access to the iPhone App Store where hundreds – and soon to be thousands – of applications for work and play can be downloaded for free or at low cost. Hardware improvements include the capability to use AT&T's speedier 3G HSDPA network (where available) and greatly improved call quality. True GPS is also new, but most say the lack of turn-by-turn directions limits its usefulness. The iPhone continues to excel at

delivering the Internet and is a great multimedia player. Web pages display perfectly, and navigation on its touchscreen is great, although using the virtual keyboard can be a chore at times.

The Apple iPhone 3G (estimated at \$200 to \$400 with a two-year AT&T service contract) is reported as an improvement on the original but is not without issues. One is cost. Though the upfront price has been dropped by \$200 on both the 8-GB and 16-GB versions, the cost of the required two-year AT&T service contract has been upped by \$10 a month, and text messaging is now an additional charge (estimated at \$5 per month for 200 text messages). Those extra charges more than offset the initial savings. AT&T remains the exclusive carrier for the iPhone.

Also, while the iPhone 3G is truly remarkable in many ways, it continues to lack voice dialing, Bluetooth stereo audio, or phone-to-phone photo sending, and there's no card slot for adding more memory. The sealed battery has to be returned to Apple when it reaches the end of its life.

Conclusion

PDAs, like all technology, are constantly being improved. Larger screens, more memory, and many new options are being introduced daily. Find the one that is right for you and enjoy the benefits.

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