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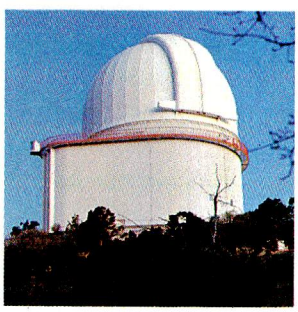

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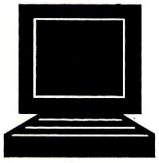
A Virtual Office

By CHRIS KERN

Portable computers offer businesspeople flexibility whether they are across the street or across the nation from their offices.

Consider this scenario: The marketing director of an East Coast manufacturing company is on a business trip to negotiate a sales contract with a California-based chain of retail stores.

Early in the evening, after the final, successful, negotiating session, he returns to his hotel room. There he opens up a small suitcase, revealing a portable computer. Using the computer as a word-processor, he composes a detailed memorandum to his boss about the contract terms. When he has finished the memo, he dials a number at his home office, where it is now well past normal business hours. He puts the telephone headset in an acoustic coupler attached to the portable computer and transmits the memorandum electronically to a large computer system at the company's headquarters.



After he has finished sending the memorandum, a display appears on the screen to inform him that he also has electronic "mail" waiting. He "collects" several messages from the computer; some are from colleagues at the company, some are from outside business contacts. He answers each piece of correspondence with a few typed lines and "mails" them electronically to the appropriate person. In the morning these ☞

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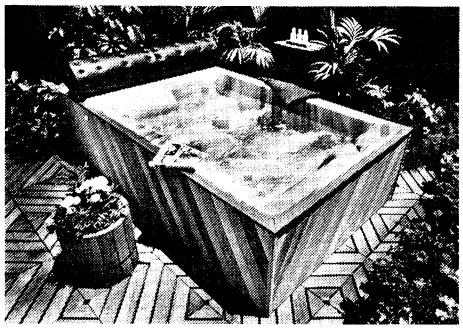

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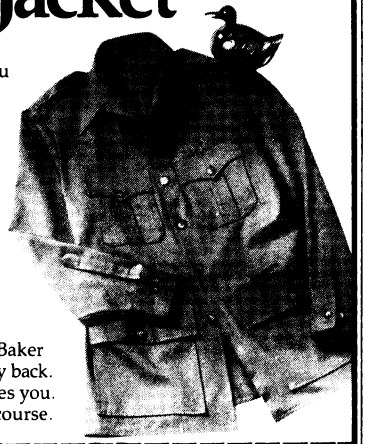

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persons will find mail waiting on their terminals.

As long as he is in contact with the headquarters computer, he decides to see how things are going in his own department. He retrieves the latest sales figures and a summary of his departmental budget, and stores them on his portable computer's magnetic disk for later analysis. Then he heads downstairs for dinner.

The prospect of doing business while on the road is one reason for the explosive growth of the portable-computer market. The idea is to give the business traveler the same benefits that the personal computer can bring to office work: faster creation and transmission of documents, fewer missed phone calls, and better information about conditions both inside and outside the company.

A transplanted British computer scientist, Adam Osborne, is generally credited for creating the practical portable computer

Tips on Traveling With a Portable Computer

The new portable computers are built to be more rugged than standard personal computers. Even so, they are still relatively delicate electronic instruments and require more care than ordinary baggage.

The two weakest points are probably the televisionlike cathode ray tube (CRT), which is used by most portable computers as a display device, and the floppy-disk drives, which many machines use for long-term storage.

The CRT is vulnerable to severe shocks, so be careful not to drop the computer or allow it to bang against anything hard. When you are driving, it is probably best not to carry a portable computer in the trunk; a car seat is a pretty good shock absorber. And a portable computer should be carried on an airplane rather than being checked. Most of them are designed to fit under plane seats.

Protecting disk drives requires one extra precaution. Never travel with a computer without inserting the cardboard inserts that were installed in the drives when the machine was purchased. These are pieces of thin cardboard shaped like floppy disks. If you have lost yours, or if for some reason your computer didn't come with them, you can easily make them yourself using a real floppy disk as a template.

in 1981. He achieved instant success with his boxy Osborne I, a no-frills machine with a five-inch video screen and a utilitarian appearance that might be described as World War II government issue. In less than three years Osborne sold 100,000 of the portables. With a list price of less than $2,000 and a bundle of standard-equipment software, the Osborne I was not only portable, it was one of the best bargains in the personal-computer market.

The Osborne I, the new Osborne Executive computers, and their growing number of competitors are full-featured personal computers that are designed for ruggedness and portability. But the full-feature portables are just one of four ways for the business traveler to have access to computer resources while on the road.

The simplest method is to carry a portable terminal, a device that allows the traveler to communicate with an office computer from a remote site. The word *terminal* in this sense means a machine that is intended only for transmission and retrieval. No data are stored in the terminal, and no data processing is performed. The terminal is just a means of communicating with a computer that is somewhere else. Indeed, the terminal may not be a computer at all. Many of these machines use paper rather than a video screen to display information in order to provide a permanent record of the transaction.

The second method is the special-purpose computer, usually one designed for word processing. Like the portable terminal, it can be used for data entry and retrieval on a large machine located somewhere else. But it also contains a program that allows the user to do text editing and formatting. The user can compose documents on this machine and save them or transmit them to another computer — or do both.

The Osborne and other computers like it fall in the third category of true general-purpose computers (such as the one used by the marketing director in our scenario). They use floppy disks to store programs, documents, and other data. They can do word processing or function as portable terminals. But they can also be loaded with a variety of software: an accounting program, for example, or a data-base management program for filing and retrieving large amounts of detailed information. A Kaypro II that I recently purchased came with word-processing software, a spelling program and dictionary, a set of other programs to aid in the composition of documents, two accounting programs, a data-base manager, two different BASIC (a computer language) interpreters for those who write their own programs, and several computer games.

In the final category are the hand-held ☞

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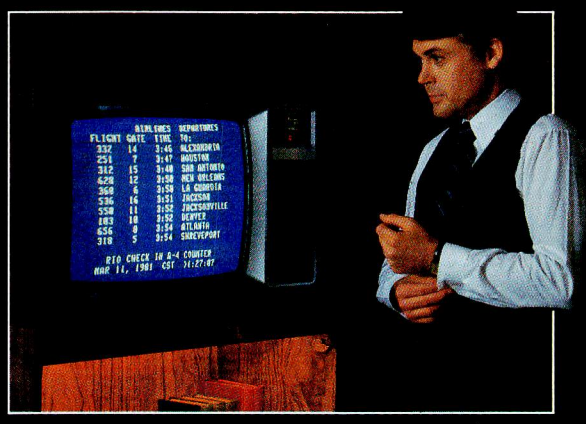

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machines — computers small enough to be carried in brief cases. Currently, most of the hand-helds fall far short of the capabilities of the Osborne-style portables. Their memory is limited, their video screens can only display a few lines at a time, they have no disk-storage capability, and the software available for them is primitive at best. But all these liabilities are sure to disappear as dense semiconductor memory chips, flat video screen technologies, microdisks, and diskless "magnetic bubble" storage become inexpensive enough to incorporate in new hand-held computer systems.

The point of carrying a portable computer on a business trip, or having at home a personal computer that can communicate with an office computer system, is to provide a uniform environment for doing work wherever the work is done. In theory, at least, a portable computer, the right kind of software, and a telecommunications link can become a "virtual office" that travels with the business manager, staff employee, or professional wherever he or she goes. I have borrowed the term *virtual office* from the "virtual memory" available on some large computers, which allows them to treat their distinct primary and disk-storage memories as though they were the same. The computer scientists probably borrowed the term from optics, where a "virtual image" is an apparent image, such as the one in a mirror. The virtual office is a set of capabilities at a remote site that are indistinguishable from those available in the real, physical office.

The virtual-office concept is what is behind much of the speculation about how small computers will change the nature of office work. Some say that the computer may spell the end of the commuter — that a new generation of office workers will do their jobs from home, using personal computers connected to each other in a network. That may be a bit far-fetched. What is undeniably true, however, is that inexpensive small computers can be used to transmit much of the information that is now transferred on paper, reducing the need for people to be in physical proximity for paper work to get done. The portable computer can break the chain that ties many of us to our desks. Its real impact may be to increase mobility rather than reduce it.

Which brings us back to our hypothetical marketing director: Everything he does in the introductory scenario is now possible. More to the point, everything he does is within the capabilities of most medium- to large-sized enterprises, and even small ones, if there is someone around to do the computer programing at the home office.

Many of the portable computers available today can perform the described tasks: composing text, transmitting text, receiving data in return, acting as a terminal of a large computer system, and saving information on disk or some other medium for later use. Some of them can also be used to do other sophisticated data-processing jobs. One of the most important will be to ensure the security of the information transmitted on public telecommunications circuits. Fortunately, adequate data security for most purposes is available on relatively simple software.

However, the virtual office, or even the restricted version described in the scenario, is all but nonexistent today. The limiting factor is usually back at headquarters, where the traditions of centralized data processing often prevent information from being transmitted in a form that a personal computer could use. Until recently, most business data processing has been based on the premise that relatively few employees will communicate with the computer directly. Information that is kept in computers still tends to be distributed on paper.

That doesn't mean you should put off a purchase if you are enticed by the advertisements for portable computer systems and want to use one in your work. A good machine — a machine supplied with software that is both flexible and easy to use — can help you do your job immediately. And as more and more office workers acquire personal computers, they are sure to exert pressure on data-processing departments to help put their machines to use.

It's even possible to buy a portable computer now with some assurance that it will be able to communicate in the future with enhanced office systems. There are only two conditions that must be met.

First, make sure that the portable can accept different programs.

Second, make sure the portable uses one of the popular operating systems. These are the master control programs — known by such names as CP/M, MS-DOS, and UNIX — under which all other programs run. As long as your machine uses one of the common operating systems, someone is likely to be around to write and market the software.

The virtual office, if it ever evolves, may come into being by pulling itself up by its automated bootstraps. Employees with privately owned or company-supplied personal computers will create demand for new capabilities from centralized office systems. Management and data-processing departments will add new features for their central computer systems once there are enough employees who can use them to make them worth the time and cost to implement.

Chris Kern is a Washington, D.C., journalist and the author of numerous articles on personal computing.