I've a Feeling We're not in Rockland Any More, Toto
(Selecting a computer for mobile use)

The voice at the other end of the phone sounds desperate. "Help! I'm in Dallas, I'm presenting to an important client in 20 minutes, and my computer froze." As business becomes more mobile and faster-paced, laptop computers aren't just for large companies any more. To reap the benefits of mobile computing while avoiding the pitfalls, it's important to choose the right computer, equip it properly and train the users.

The first step in choosing a computer for mobile use is to determine exactly what it will (and will not) be used for. If word processing and e-mail are the primary uses, a lightweight, moderately priced machine is perfect, but multimedia presentations demand a more powerful machine. A laptop to be used both in the office and on the road must be versatile and easy to connect to the network.

Compared to a desktop, a laptop is easier to transport, and can be shipped out for repair, but the initial purchase, accessories and upgrades are more expensive. Laptops fall into three major classes. *"Value"* class machines range from $600 to $1400, depending on features like processor speed, hard disk capacity, and CD-rom. *Lightweights* are thinner and lighter, with external floppy drive and CD-rom. They run from $1300 to about $3000. *Premiums*, with larger hard disks, faster processors, better sound, and bigger screens than the value class, sell for $1500 to $3000. Some upper range machines have wide screens, the same shape as a DVD movie.

A major decision factor in laptops is screen size. A few years ago, lower cost machines featured dual-scan (or DSTN) screen technology. DSTN screens tend to wash out in bright light and show "streaking" when the mouse is moved or the picture changes suddenly, as when showing a video. All machines on the market today have active matrix (TFT) screens, which are brighter, sharper, have a wider viewing angle, and don't "streak".

A laptop has a relatively small but sharp screen. For a presentation to one person, a 12" screen is certainly adequate. For presentations to two people, a 14" or 15" screen would be better. If money and weight are no object, you can get a wide-format 17" screen, great for watching movies. (Do you really want to watch a movie on a computer?) For presentations to groups, you can connect an external monitor or an LCD projector.

Another decision factor is the style of pointing device, touchpad or joystick. I've used and dislike both; I prefer a mouse. Fortunately, laptops have mouse sockets.

Popular brands include Toshiba, Compaq, Dell, Sony and IBM. Numerous second tier, private and mail order brands are also available. Laptops are tricky to repair, so be sure the supplier will have parts and service for the expected life of the machine. Oh, and be sure to get an extended warranty -- repair costs are eye-popping.

The next decision is where to buy. If you have not purchased a laptop before, you may want to examine several models in a store to decide whether you prefer a joystick or touch pad. Be careful when buying via mail order, as mail order vendors usually charge hefty restocking fees on returned laptops.

If not included, a modem will cost around $50. If you plan to connect the laptop to the office network, an adapter will cost $30 - $50. Most laptops today come with at least a wired Ethernet adapter; most mid-range and higher models have both wired and wireless.

Enjoy your laptop, but make sure the battery is charged before that important presentation!

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