Why netbooks are the newest little big thing

Switched on
Andrew Parker

NETBOOK computers, the tiny, basic laptops which have been the buzz of a deflated computer industry, trace their roots to the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) initiative, an inspirational, non-profit project to provide children of the Third World and developing countries with a cheap, robust and reliable laptop computer to suit even remote areas without electricity.

You can see this innovative computer and read about the initiative. at **www.laptop.org**

The OLPC initiative appointed Taiwanese tech behemoth Quanta to manufacture its device. Quanta's rivals, perhaps inspired or threatened by the OLPC idea, soon started to design their own cheap mini-notebook computers.

The aim at the time was to produce a commercial equivalent of OLPC's device that would be an entry to computing for children, pensioners and those for whom a R10 000 laptop was out of the question. However, after Asus launched its EeePC, the first netbook, it quickly became apparent that these new "must-haves" were becoming popular in relatively affluent markets as secondary, mobile devices to supplement a computer at home or the office, or even another, bigger laptop.

Just last week, my brother gave me an Acer Aspire One netbook as a birthday gift. I've taken to it immediately, in preference to my Asus EeePC 900.

The keyboard is almost full-sized which makes it far more comfortable to use and improves my typing accuracy considerably. The layout of the keys is also an improvement over the Asus model, particularly the placement of the right "Shift" key.

On many netbooks, this key is shortened to fit and placed next to one of the arrow keys, so mistakes occur frequently.

The Acer's keyboard is bigger and the keys are in the standard layout, but to be fair to its competitors, the Aspire One is a little bigger and longer than many netbooks.

Most netbooks have a built-in camera for video calls using software such as Skype. They also usually include at least one memory card reader, making them perfect for copying photos from a digital camera.

Netbooks have pretty standard configurations across most brands, with the exception of hard drives. Cheaper netbooks usually have solid state drives (referred to as SSD).

Their size is usually between 4 and 16 gigabytes. If you plan to use your computer for nothing more than some basic web browsing and e-mail, then an SSD drive will be fine, especially if you supplement it with an external device such as a USB flash drive.

If you need to store large files like movies or music, then you should consider a standard hard drive.

These drives start around 80GB and go up to 160GB in most netbooks. Using a standard drive does reduce battery life a little more than an SSD though, and another advantage of SSD drives is that they are more shock-proof than conventional hard drives, since they don't use any moving parts.

Finally, but just as important, you will need to choose a battery. Most machines come with a battery good for about two or three hours of work. If you need more time on the road, you'll have to find yourself a six-cell battery (usually an optional extra). This power source should last up to five hours but adds some weight and bulk to the machine.

So there you have it: netbooks are small, low-power laptops, nothing more.

But they are doubtless the biggest thing to happen in computing for years. In just a few months, we went from the Asus EeePC, to well over 50 varieties. If you're on the road and want to carry less, then a netbook may be the perfect solution for you.

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