

■ Desk machine or Portable?

It is mid 2009 and, post credit crunch, it has never been a better time to save money on computer purchases. Whether it's a question of upgrading and older machine or buying a replacement, some great deals are available. And things look likely to continue in this vein.

So should we buy a portable or a desktop installation? In the main, desktop machines get you the best performance for the least outlay. But assuming you are not looking for the most powerful kit for processing video files or serious gaming, a portable can deliver excellent performance for surprisingly little outlay, especially if you buy wisely.

And screen sizes are becoming more realistic on the latest portables. I recently helped a client buy and configure a first class, known-brand portable with a brilliant 18.5 inch screen for 600 Euro, delivered to the door.

But remember, this size will reduce somewhat the portability of the machine. You might consider such a machine to be 'luggable' rather than portable, unless you're a burly type who's used to hauling plenty of luggage!

At the other end of the scale, you can buy a tiny portable and link it to a low-cost, full-size external mouse and keyboard. And if the screen proves too small, you can plug in an external monitor of any size to give you that 'desktop' working environment. Some of the latest machines have most impressive performance and, when linked to desk peripherals, offer desk usability and true portability.

A word of caution may be appropriate here. Portables are almost invariably more costly to repair in the event of failure. If something's spilt into your ordinary keyboard, just replace it for not much more than 10 or 15 Euro. But if the same happens to the portable, expect a hefty bill.

Also bear in mind that desktop machines are easier to upgrade if you find you need more performance. So it's likely that you can keep a desk machine going for longer than a portable and this is a key issue if budgets are important.

■ New or Second Hand?

I would hesitate to recommend a second hand portable. I'm sure that many will be excellent but I never cease to be amazed by how much money people want for them. For reasons we've discussed above, I would give them a miss and save up for a new one, one that'll probably be cheaper by the time you've saved up!

But for a desk machine I say, "Why not?" I've bought a number of 'corporate' style machines that come with Windows XP Pro licences and, with a bit of tweaking, they've been great.

However, it has to be said that in current economic conditions, the price of new machines makes them more attractive. And if you really hate Vista, we can help you go painlessly back to XP or we can make your Vista look and perform more like XP.

■ Or an Upgrade?

In the world of portables, upgrades are rather limited. Aside from adding a big screen or external keyboard and mouse, the only realistic upgrades are to main memory (RAM) and, in some cases, to the internal disc drive.

If you find that your portable could do with a boost, adding more memory is the best place to start. But do be sure that, if it's an older machine, it's capable of recognising the extra memory. I have recently upgraded a fairly new portable that was supplied with Windows Vista and only 1GB of RAM. The shared graphics memory of this machine meant that Vista had little more than 700 MB to work with; scarcely adequate. We removed the existing memory and replaced it with 4 GB. The performance increase is considerable.

Desk machines lend themselves to many more upgrades. Memory, obviously. Vista is memory-hungry and other operating systems always benefit from extra memory.

Faster disc drives can help an old machine perform much better and give it a new lease of life. I have recently reconfigured a number of old Pentium 4 PCs using ex-server SCSI (a long-established disc control standard that provides high speed, greater reliability and demands less of the main processor's resources) disc drives. The speed increase is truly impressive.

Your old desk PC might also benefit from a new graphics adapter, especially if you're using a modern screen. Good graphics increases speed but the real benefit, to my mind, is the quality of display. So do consider new graphics. Work becomes more of a pleasure and less of a strain on the eyes.

And if you use your PC to feed music to your HiFi, do consider a new and higher quality sound card. I recently added an old, used sound card I had in stock (gold connectors suggested good quality!) to my music PC and the improvement was stunning when played back over the home HiFi; in fact, the quality is better than the audiophile-grade CD player that we used before.

■ What shall I do with my Old PC or Components?

What about using it as a backup device for your new one?

Or perhaps there are some local children or societies that could do with a basic PC.

But don't dump it. I can dispose of it or recycle it for you.

■ What about just a Tune-up?

One of our basic services is the 'Windows cleanup'. It involves all the usual maintenance tasks like disc error check, defragmentation and anti-malware scan. But we also run a system tune-up that optimises some of the Windows internals and usually gives a useful boost in performance.

Optionally, we can adjust the way that Windows is displayed and this can speed things up too, especially on older machines.

