Personal digital assistants:
Which one is right for your practice?

PDAs come in many models and offer a range of features and extras. Here's help sorting through the options.

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Personal digital assistants (PDAs) are becoming more commonplace in practice because they immediately provide critical information at the point of care.

If you're in the market for a handheld computer, chances are you're fazed by the multitude of available models, upgrades, and extras. Choosing a PDA is not that difficult, however, if you take the time to assess your needs and do a little homework. Start by answering these four questions:

1. Why do I need a PDA? Look at your work patterns and see how a PDA would fit in. Do you frequently look up DSM-IV criteria and other reference information? Are you constantly writing prescriptions, giving presentations, or assessing drug-drug interactions? Do you find yourself regularly checking your schedule?

Also try to envision:

- where you would carry the device

- where, when, and how you would charge it when needed

- what connections to computers for data exchange are available

- with whom you would share data

- and from whom you could get technical support.

You may have trouble thinking that far ahead, but doing so will help you narrow your PDA choices.

2. Which operating system should I use? A PDA operates on one of four main operating systems:

- Palm OS, the most popular world wide

- EPOC OS, which is more popular in Europe

- Pocket PC, which is rapidly gaining popularity

- and Linux OS, which recently entered the PDA market.

Choosing a PDA platform is much like deciding between Macintosh and Windows. The differences between PDAs based on Pocket PC or Palm OS have been diminishing in the last year. All PDAs have similar basic personal information manager

functions, but available software, hardware features, and accessories set them apart. Pocket PC-based PDAs generally have much more memory and more diverse multimedia capabilities-but also lower battery life (1 day with average use) and compatibility with fewer software titles-than do Palm OS devices.

Because of their higher memory capacity, Pocket PC PDAs may generally be better suited to:

- large groups or organizations

- and users who rely heavily on multimedia, large data sets, or interface with Microsoft Office documents.

However, newer PDAs that are based on Palm OS 5 and employ the StrongARM processor (as do Pocket PC devices) offer greatly improved function in these areas. Compared with Pocket PC PDAs, Palm OS devices are much more intuitive and easier to use, offer longer battery life (1 week or more for average use), and are compatible with more medical software titles. More physicians use Palm OS PDAs because of their simplicity and reliability.

Consider either a Palm or Pocket PC PDA. EPOC PDAs are good devices, but Psion, a major manufacturer, has ceased development of EPOC devices to focus on specific markets. Linux PDAs are only recommended to users who are familiar with Linux or UNIX and are capable of writing their own software.

3. Where should I purchase my PDA? Visit any major computer, office supply, or electronics or chain retailer and check out the different models and manufacturers. Consider your priorities on features such as size, screen resolution, color, weight, memory, wireless capability, and accessory options. Consider purchasing there or online.

The level of support you need should dictate your point of purchase. Online retailers usually charge less for PDAs, but devices may be back-ordered and support often is offered only through the manufacturer. Beginners are probably wise to purchase locally and obtain support through the store.

4. How can I avoid purchasing a soon-to-be-obsolete model? Because PDA technology is improving so rapidly, new devices are frequently reaching the market. This can be frustrating to someone who has just purchased what he or she thought was the latest model.

If you are a beginner, plan to keep your PDA device for at least 1 year while you gradually learn to use it to its full potential. Consider spending about $200 for a device, then upgrade only when newer devices provide more features that you can use. Avid users may upgrade more frequently and spend $500 or more for a device.

PALM VS. POCKET PC: FINER POINTS

Palm OS PDAs. If you are new to PDAs, start with a Palm OS-based PDA from Palm, Sony, or Handspring. The Sony models make more sense if you have or plan to purchase other Sony products (e.g., digital cameras, digital camcorders, computers) because the PDA's external memory stick can be shared among the products.

Handspring offers models integrated with a cellular phone if you prefer a combined device. The Palm Tungsten T has built-in Bluetooth wireless mobile capability and offers portable keyboards that fold out to full size.

Pocket PC PDAs. Not long ago, Pocket PC PDAs were only compatible with software specific to the device's processor. Today, the StrongARM processor is standard in any device running on Pocket PC 2002. Therefore, stick with Pocket PC 2002 devices only, as many of the earlier devices cannot be upgraded.

Because Pocket PC devices offer such a short battery life, consider a device with interchangeable lithium batteries or purchase a portable charger. If you choose a Pocket PC with integrated wireless connectivity, be aware that your battery life will be about 2 to 3 hours. Avoid the Jornada line of handhelds, as these will be phased out in the merger of Compaq and Hewlett Packard.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PDAS

The Internet has a wealth of information on these devices. PDABuzz, Handango, and PDAGeek offer reviews, user opinions, and useful links. Two excellent magazines, Handheld Computing Magazine (www.hhcmag.com) and Pocket PC Magazine (www.pocketpcmag.com), are devoted to PDA/handheld computers. Manufacturers also post extensive information about their PDA devices on their Web sites (Box).

If you have any questions about PDAs or comments about Psyber Psychiatry, click here to contact Dr. Luo or send an e-mail to Current.Psychiatry@dowdenhealth.com.

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PDA MANUFACTURERS

Palm OS

Manufacturer URL

Palm www.palm.com

Handspring www.handspring.com

HandEra www.handera.com

Sony http://www.sonystyle.com/

Acer global.acer.com/products/pda/index.htm

Pocket PC OS

Audiovox www.audiovox.com/pda

Casio www.casio.com

Toshiba pda.toshiba.com

HP www.compaq.com/products/handhelds/pocketpc/index.html

NEC www.neccomp.com/v2/products/MobilePro/P300/

Zayo (Asus) usa.asus.com/PDA/a600/overview.htm

ViewSonic www.viewsonic.com/products/pocket_pc_pocketpcv35.htm

URThere www.urthere.com

Related Resources

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Disclosure:

Dr. Luo reports no financial relationship with any company whose products are mentioned in this article. The opinions expressed by Dr. Luo in this column are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of CURRENT PSYCHIATRY.