

LIVING IT

DEBATING CHAMBER...

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Recent research from Vanson Bourne, commissioned by BlackBerry makers, Research-in-Motion (RIM) found that 56 percent of SME owners spend at least one working day away from their desk every week and 68 percent rate access to email as important when away from the office. But with a wide range of handheld devices on the market, what's the best tool to use when you are out on the road, on the train or sat in an airport lounge. We brought two experts in the field together to talk about the merits of PDAs and so-called 'smart' phones and how they stack up against each other.

OUR PANEL

Neil Dagger, Senior Category Manager for Smart Handhelds and Wireless Devices for HP UK & Ireland.

Suneet Singh Tuli, CEO of DataWind, producer of the PocketSurfer2, a GPRS-based hand-held mobile Internet device.

ROAD WARRIORS, CHOOSE YOUR WEAPONS.

If I am a small business, what's the best option for me and my staff – PDAs or smart phones and why?

SINGH TULI: Nowadays, more and more features are added to a mobile handheld. It can not only make phone calls, text messages, browse Internet, but also store files, listen to music, play games, and handle many more tasks. The first question for a small business to think about is whether you really need all these features in one device and how each of them can improve your productivity. To coordinate all those features into a device the size of a candy bar, there are always compromises. When browsing the web, the tiny screen, low bandwidth, and lack of input method make the experience terrible. You may consider a dedicated wireless web access device if your work requires remote access to critical data and web contents.

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DAGGER: PDAs and smart phones are equally effective, but do serve different purposes. Your type of business doesn't affect which is more suitable for you – your needs do. Firstly you must decide which is more important to your business, voice or data. If voice and email are imperative, then opt for the smart phone, or wireless handheld. These all-in-one devices provide voice, push email and a vast range of other applications, including a camera. If you have a need to edit numerous documents, a full QWERTY keyboard would be recommended.

However if data and a larger screen is crucial, then the classic PDA would be more suitable. This would allow emails to be received when in a WiFi hotspot, and the full Microsoft Office suite. These devices would also have a longer battery life as there are less applications being run on it at any one time."

Would I be better off giving everyone notebook PCs with 3G cards?

SINGH TULI: The major drawback of notebook PCs and 3G service is their costs. For a small business, you have to carefully manage your budget. As well as the investment in hardware, you'll get a hefty monthly bill. In most cases, a PDA or a smart phone is good enough to handle business tasks and offers you better portability. Notably, there are other handheld alternatives that offer fast web access with no contract and no activation or monthly fee.

I have heard that sales of PDAs are falling while smart phones sales are on the increase, so is buying a PDA really not a smart move any more?

DAGGER: Your purchase decision absolutely shouldn't be made on the sales figures of the products – you should buy the product that is right for you and best meets your needs. Both devices are incredibly useful when used to the correct criteria – just because your competitor buys a smart phone, it doesn't necessarily mean it is the best device for you. Take your time, evaluate your needs and make an informed decision.

Furthermore, the market is not this simple to categorise. Whilst the classic PDA is declining in sales, it will never become extinct as it will always fill a specific need, i.e. easy wireless access to large amounts of data, for example in manufacturing or retail warehouse. That said, it is true that the other wireless handhelds, like sat-nav devices and smart phones, are increasing in sales. But that does not mean that the other types of device are redundant, so PDAs are

still a good choice if they are right for your needs. But what are the real differences between these technologies anyway? Aren't they just a different variation on the same theme? Should we be asking a different question such as, should I buy a smart phone/PDA or laptop?

SINGH TULI: PDAs and smart phones are more and more like each other, reflecting the market trend of the convergence of PC industry and telecommunications. When considering an investment on a smart phone/PDA or a laptop, features and costs should be the most important criteria for your decision.

DAGGER: "The PDA and the smart phone are very different devices, each containing hundreds of different technologies. The PDA ultimately complements the regular mobile phone, whilst the smart phone provides the two-in-one device. As the smart phone contains so many offerings in one shell, some things may need to be compromised such as battery life, screen size and so on – and some customers are not prepared to compromise in some of these areas. On the other hand, the PDA does provide fewer applications, but the bigger screen means managing calendars and editing documents is easier. But essentially both are mobile, compact and easy to use anywhere, be that in the office, car, building site or on the street."

Where are these technologies going? Will they all merge into one type of device or are we going to see lots of different devices? I'm confused now! How can we make good choices today and be sure that we'll get decent investment protection and what we've bought won't be out of date or redundant within a few months?

SINGH TULI: Although with technology advancing, it looks like a small handheld device can do almost everything, it is human nature that we need different devices specialised in different tasks. Not only to merge multiple functions into one handheld means compromise on different features, but also the multi-task requires more than one tool to facilitate your daily job. For example, you may need to make a phone call on your mobile phone, while checking emails on a BlackBerry, and searching the web using a notebook or a PDA simultaneously. In my opinion, people need at least two devices in their pockets, one mobile phone to carry voice calls, messages, and fulfill their entertainment needs, and one portable web access device.