

A 'common sense' guide to small business computing.

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The idea of this little guide is to help anyone, from the beginner to computers through to the experienced user, plan out their requirements with regard to computers in their business as well as providing a checklist of items to bear in mind when considering computer equipment (new or second hand, first computer or upgrading).

Please bear in mind that this guide is based on my experiences in the computer industry, both from the point of view of a 'user' in my own business as well as assessing and installing other peoples requirements (individuals and small business in both home and office environments).

Also, before we start in on choosing your system, one or two major points. Firstly, don't think that just because the latest machines have certain 'go-faster' features (depending on when you're reading this, the 52x CD Writer DVD combo drives are the 'in thing' at the moment) you need these to run your business. You do not need to spend all of your computing budget on a machine with 'special' features. You can do yourself a lot more favours by ensuring that you have a reasonably large hard disk (at the moment, 80Gb) and plenty of memory (256Mb minimum, typically 512Mb). My easiest rule for this is, if in doubt, buy more memory!

Also, don't be misled into the popular assumption that you don't need to buy software (unless you want to use Linux and its associated free programmes to run your business (this will involve more expense from a support point of view, as well as downloading the software to start with)). Even if a 'mate' offers you a package that will get you up and running ok, if it's not original with a box and licence don't touch it with a barge pole! There are very stiff fines for using copied (pirate) software for running a business. This includes purchasing a machine with software pre-loaded on it (unless the store has a licence to do so). I have had more than one client have a system 'crash' and, when I have asked them for the system disks / CD to re-install the system, say that 'it all came on the machine', or 'I didn't get any of that'. Oops.....

I realise that some stores have now taken to pre-loading the software on the PC's if you buy them new. If this is the case, ensure that you get a 'Rescue CD' with the machine that allows you to re-install the machine. If you don't, try another company! This is not just for your own peace of mind, but there almost always comes a time when the

What you should do before even considering a PC.

Try and ensure that you have a fair idea of what you want to do with the machine before starting to shop around. For example, if you want the machine for running the business accounts and Office work such as letter writing (Word Processing) and record keeping (Databases) take a look at some of the popular 'Office' packages available (such as Works Suite or Office XP, for example). See which packages you can 'get on with'.

Next, you need to read the packaging relating to the software that you have decided to use. Somewhere on the box will be a section labelled 'System Requirements'. Don't go by the minimum requirements, use the recommended ones. These are more likely to give you a machine that easily runs the programmes you want to use, as opposed to a machine that just about gets by. Software writers nearly always under-estimate the minimum needs of their products.

If in doubt, either ask one of the assistants at the shop or (better) check out the internet via the local library or 'Cyber Café' and see what other users of the packages you are interested in are running them on. Don't forget what I said at the start about getting 'carried away', however.

Once you have a fair idea of what the programmes you need require to run well, you can start shopping around for a good deal based on those 'specifications' as they are known in the trade.

Choosing a PC.

(Please note: printers deserve a section on their own. I'm featuring them later on.)

New Computers:

With your copy of your needed requirements clasped firmly in your hand you can start checking out the high street and specialist computer shop 'deals' to see which comes closest to matching your requirements. Hello, minefield! The classic mistakes are to either wander into a store with a computer magazine under your arm or starting a conversation with a sales person with the words 'I know nothing about computers...'. I know that this should be the way to start out, but it only works like this in the ideal world, for reasons that I'll now explain.

The computer magazine start is almost always asking for trouble. The reason for this is that the salesperson knows that you will ask him for a machine like, say, the XX32 Wizzo on page 77 (with the black case and free printer that matches your specification). He thinks you will then say 'but why can't you sell it for £X?' and show him the advert from the magazine, featuring their price. Stores cannot match mail order prices in the great majority of cases because store prices have to build in overheads, staff costs, deliveries and other items. Even some larger stores have 'Internet Only' prices that are different from their normal store prices. Just use the 'spec sheet' that you worked out earlier and then, if you need to, ask a sales person for a machine of the type that you want (but don't be pushed into buying unnecessary extras, especially bundled software (unless it is already on your 'spec sheet')).

The 'I know nothing...' start almost always leaves you wide open to being sold whatever the 'big deal' in the store is at the time. This will probably be on hire purchase or some other form of finance, leaving you with a woefully under - powered PC or, worse still, an expensive over - powered one, as well as a large bill. Once again, the approach is to stick to your 'spec sheet'.

Used Computers:

Buying a used computer is a minefield at the best of times (I should know, I've had to crank up enough of them in the past so that they can do the job(s) they were bought for). However, there are still some genuine bargains to be had. Some of the best bargains come from the same local dealers that sell you the new machines. What you need to look for is a dealer that gives part exchange on new computer systems. This means that there will normally be a wide range of used computers available for you to choose from.

Once again, apply the needed requirements list. It will be even more tempting to add extra bits, especially because you're getting the machine at such a good price.....

Note, most dealers will give at least some kind of warranty on a used machine. If they don't, find another store! I would expect to get at least three months warranty on any used equipment.

I have seen some quite reasonable bargains in the used computer market. You may also find that as the previous owner has wanted to keep his 'brand x' CD-Writer as opposed to having a new 'brand-y' unit. This means that, to sell the machine, the dealer has had to fit different parts. If anything looks as if it 'didn't come as standard' it probably didn't, but this isn't necessarily a bad thing. However, always see the machine running in the shop!

Printers:

This is one of the most misunderstood areas of computing, mainly because you have to think about such things as 'consumables' and 'running costs'. One important point of advice, however:

Never buy a second-hand inkjet printer!

There are so many things that can go wrong with an inkjet, for example, earlier Epson inkjets suffer from a complaint called 'nozzle block' if left unused for more than a week which can, in drastic cases, render the printer completely unusable!

Also, be very careful about the cost of cartridges before purchasing. Indeed, a company on the web now 'gives away' the printer as long as you buy a complete set of cartridges for it (you may have seen the adverts). My local free ad paper is normally littered with adverts for used printers of this type (or other brands where the cartridges cost a fortune) and I have been given printers in the past that people have dumped in exasperation because of the cost of the cartridges.

Also, 're-inking', or using 'compatible' cartridges, is not the answer. These cartridges never give the quality and colour matching of original cartridges, and they also can cause the very nozzle block problems that mean you have to get rid of the printer!