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*From the September 2005 Issue*

A long, long time ago (about 40 years) in a galaxy not so far away (okay, this galaxy), computers were very big and very expensive. The great sages of the time realized that the work of mere mortals was so easy for the electronic marvels of that day that it was possible for many (many) users to share one computer at the same time.

A great disturbance was felt in the Force when a rag tag union of Rebels formed an alliance and built computers that were small, cheap and (gasp!) ... personal! Since each user could afford his own entire electronic marvel, the idea of "time-sharing" went the way of DeLoreans.

But as it turned out, Personal was chaotic, and the New Empire arose with a new concept in which the Personal Computers were linked together in a vast inter-galactic network (who says that I am prone to exaggeration?) and shared data and content throughout the Universe. The sages called this network the Internet, and the Force was strong with it.

Now comes a new upstart from NComputing, Inc. called PC Expansion. They have produced a device that is in effect a Personal Time-Sharing Terminal. Since the modern PCs are so powerful (thanks to Moore's Law and WinTel marketing prowess), it turns out that they really are severely underutilized. NComputing has built a device that will allow you to attach up to 10 users to ONE PC. Each user needs a PC Expansion box, a monitor, a keyboard, a mouse and a LAN connection.



With this setup, each user can run separate applications on the host PC, effectively

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So you get to save about \$400 per user. That's not bad. Each user shares the Host Computer's CPU, Disk and Memory, which is also cool.

But wait, what about the software? As it turns out, while testing PC Expansion, we realized that all 10 users are using the software one at a time. This means that you could use one copy of Windows, Office or even your tax and accounting software for all 10 users, including the host PC (really 11 users)! This could be a great savings in flat costs, and dwarfs the potential hardware savings. NComputing suggests that you verify compliance with your software vendors before trying to do this in your office.

The entire value of this concept hinges upon the veracity of this claim. Please verify compliance with your software vendors before trying to do this in your office.

Now here's the REALLY cool part: The PC Expansion is IP based so the "client" box can be anywhere. Imagine providing your clients with such a device and letting them "share" a box that YOU control! You have only one copy of the accounting software (QuickBooks, Peachtree, MYOB, etc.), and all your clients hit it. You control the machine, update the software and have access to the data. Will this work for you? In theory, yes. In practice, maybe. Your mileage WILL vary. But this IS technology worthy of a second look.

The box is simple in concept. There are ports for VGA Monitor, Keyboard, Mouse, and LAN, but oddly, the K/B ports are PS/2 rather than the more ubiquitous USB ports that we have become accustomed to. The packing material offers a note talking about connecting the box to a Wi-Fi network, but I didn't see how this could be accomplished (nor is there any info in the documentation). Note the beneficial cost savings over a five-year period. According to NComputing, each PC Expansion will be maintenance free. Since PC Expansion has no moving parts



(i.e., CD-ROM, hard drive, power supply, CPU fan, etc.), it's virtually

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times.

My test setup was one Expansion connected via a switch to my Host (which has 512MB of RAM). According to the documentation, you would need to increase the Host's RAM to 2GB to support all 10 users.

All in all, it is an interesting device. Time-sharing can (and does) work, and multiple users can very effectively share one Host's resources. If the software licensing issue will resolve in such a way so as to allow you to use one copy of an application among 10 users, the economic model might be of interest. If not, you would be better off buying inexpensive Dells for each user (they already come with the OS anyway, and have Displays, Keyboards, Mice and LAN ports standard).

Use the Force (or do the math). The correct path will appear.

For more info, visit [www.pcexpansion.com](http://www.pcexpansion.com), and look up the PC Expansion device.

Technology

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