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Are you one of the majority of CPAs who still are without a handheld computer or PDA (personal digital assistant)? Perhaps you tried one in the past but never really clicked with it, and so it found its way into the pile of antiquated tech devices in your office, or perhaps the junk drawer at home. As public accountants increasingly find themselves outside of the office for client visits or travel, the real benefits to PDA usage have become ever more tangible, from wireless remote access for communications to digital phone capabilities to maintaining client contact information to utilizing applications that sync with in-office programs.

A Primer on PDAs

Of course, PDAs have been around for about a decade now, from the Apple Newton, Psion, Wizard and the original Palm Pilot, to today's advanced Treo and BlackBerry models. The earliest devices can even be traced back to the mid-1970s as evolving out of advanced calculators, although the devices in use now generally sprung from digital address books and wireless phones, while gradually adding various new capabilities, including integration with e-mail and contact management utilities, the ability to create and work on documents and spreadsheets, mobile web browsing, instant messaging, infrared functions, Bluetooth IR technology, cameras, handwriting recognition, GPS, greater processing capabilities, and more advanced data management.

Currently, the most popular devices include the BlackBerry, Dell Axim, iPAQ,

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Professional Usage

The initial widespread use of PDAs was centered around day planning and contact management, both of which provided a better and more portable means of keeping track of schedules and phone numbers. But the major productivity-enhancing additions

of wireless Internet capabilities and increased processing (computing) power changed the PDA into a real workhorse that offers direct benefit to the accounting professional.

Scheduling & Contact Management

To start with, electronic scheduling systems are inherently more reliable than paper-based systems, especially for offices with multiple professionals since the calendars of all of the professionals can be accessed. Ditto the advantages for contact management, since remotely edited client data can be synced back into the master contact management system upon return to the office, or uploaded via remote Internet access. Since the information stored on a PDA is also stored on the main system, if a handheld device is lost it is also much less disturbing to the practice than losing the only copy of a paper-based system. The electronic nature of the systems also enables the portability of much more data than paper methods, along with query capabilities that ease the process of searching through the data.

Remote Internet Access

Most news websites are now offering WAP (wireless access protocol) and other PDA-friendly versions of their sites, and free or per-use Hot Spots are popping up seemingly everywhere that allow users to quickly check e-mail, catch up on the news or perform other tasks such as entering time data into billing systems, filing expense reports, or synching contact management edits. The built-in cameras

on some of the systems can also be used to support asset management and other

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phone, if you wish to have wireless functions on your handheld, you should first determine the service providers in the areas you need coverage.

Of course, the right PDA depends upon the needs of the user. For road warriors, the more functions the better, since they will inevitably find value in virtually any function that enables them to perform even a minute part of their job while on the road. These airport and truck stop regulars likely already have their handheld device strapped snugly to their belt. But for those who are out of the office less frequently, the first step is determining the features that can be cost-benefit justified. At the lower end, systems provide basic personal information manager (PIM) capabilities with no remote access or web functionality. More capable business-ready models start in the \$250 to \$400 range. If you or a staff member visit clients at their offices more than an hour or two per week, the ability to enter client data, notes, time and expenses, and then sync that information back into the primary system is essential. If you or a staff member have

a considerably long commute, telecommute occasionally or are otherwise away from the office during working hours, then wireless Internet access may be valuable. (If your staff or clients regularly have to contact you on your wireless phone, then this is you and you might want to look at a "Smart Phone" model.) Similarly, if you feel the need to take your library of MP3s or videos on the road with you, a model with more memory and processing speed will be necessary.

Although PDAs can be a very personal appliance that users grow loyal to (much like Mac users love those crazy computers), there should be a standard when selecting handheld devices for an office. At the very least, the devices should be on the same platform (Palm OS, Pocket PC or BlackBerry). This will aid in ensuring compatibility and integration with server applications. If you've

never had a PDA or haven't had one in several years, you're missing

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was designed specifically for accountants and the vendor claims that its testing shows an average time savings of 10 to 15 minutes per work day for users working extensively with spreadsheets and databases. This can amount to as much as one workweek per year. Essentially, the keyboard places the most commonly used commands

closer to the primary hand positions of the user, enabling the user to save fractions of a second with each command used, such as switching between number and arrow keys on the 10-key area; common spreadsheet tasks; as well as cutting, copying, pasting and editing. Tick, tick, tick. It adds up.

You've probably heard of CNET, but you should also know about BNET (www.bnet.com). Run by the same company, BNET is focused on small and midsize businesses, offering an extensive collection of classic and current business white papers, case studies, webcasts and interactive content created and categorized for business decision-makers. Regardless of industry type or job function, the website provides business leaders with a trusted source for problem solving and the tools to get smarter about what's working at work.

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Technology

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