

# Lapping them up

Laptop computers have long been seen as expensive toys. But executives are now making more productive use of them — and getting addicted to the habit

**D**irector, integrated communications at Ogilvy & Mather, R. Sridhar works in Nariman Point but lives in Chembur. In Bombay's nightmarish traffic this means a commute of over an hour each way. But that's no longer dead time for him. These days he just whips out his trusted laptop and continues working on the way.

Sunil Modak, managing director, Spectrum Business Support, a Bombay-based software company, travels ten days a month. For him, his Compaq Aero is his office. "All that I need I've got on it," he exclaims. "Addresses, telephone numbers, notes, everything. I make presentations on it. I keep in touch with my office through it." The only problem he's ever had was when he went abroad and found the plug wasn't compatible with the sockets in his hotel room. But he found

an adaptable socket for electric shavers and happily continued working in the bathroom!

Saurabh Soonawalla is about to buy a laptop and as director of the electronics company, Hinditron, he's sure to find a lot of practical use for it. But he doesn't have any compunction in admitting that a large part of its appeal is its novelty. "It's a toy," he says cheerfully, "and I like toys!"

Personal assistant or executive toy; one way or another, these diminutive and portable personal computers are creeping into executive life. "People used to buy it for snob value," says V. Anantaraman, managing director of Wipro-Acer, "but now they are starting to realise its value." There are no formal estimates of market size, but Anantaraman estimates that last year around 10,000 machines were sold,

while this year it could grow to 25,000. Of this, he hopes to sell as many as 4,000 machines.

Laptops may be small, but their prices certainly are not. Prices can be almost double the cost of a desktop computer with equivalent features. Zenith, for example, sells its 486 DX-33 desktop model for a base price of Rs34,000, but its 486 SX-25 laptop sells for Rs65,000.

So why pay the premium? Iqbal Fazal, marketing manager, Magnerra Innovations Ltd, the first company to assemble laptops in India, lists four reasons. "First and most obviously," he says, "is portability." A laptop gives you computing power wherever you are, whenever you want it. Next comes security. "Everyone has some information that is for himself only. Since a laptop stays with you, so does your information." Ease of communication is the third reason. "With faxes, modems and wide area networks," Fazal continues, "wherever anyone is, whether



Desai (centre) encourages his staff to work at home with laptops

Pankaj Desai

## Feature

at home or while travelling, he can use a modem to plug his laptop into the telephone system and instantly access his office." And finally, Fazal admits, "Some people are still buying it because its the in thing!"

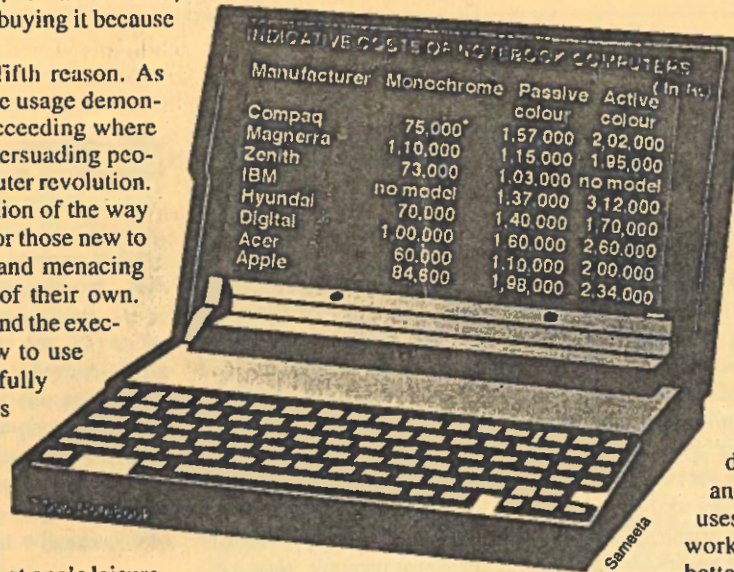
Perhaps there's a fifth reason. As the growth in corporate usage demonstrates, laptops are succeeding where desktops couldn't in persuading people to join in the computer revolution. It could just be a question of the way they look. Desktops, for those new to computers, are large and menacing machines with a life of their own. They can't be moved and the executive has to learn how to use them slowly and painfully in full view of his juniors. Laptops, on the other hand, look like souped-up electronic calculators and can be taken home and fiddled with at one's leisure.

As with most hi-tech products, usage starts with a key person — the 'early user' in marketing jargon — who starts

spreading the technology. In an entrepreneur-led corporation, it's usually the boss. Modak of Spectrum, for

Bhandari, sales manager of Zenith Computers, notes that in large professional-run corporations the pattern is slightly different. "There's generally one manager who pushes hard for a laptop," he says. "Then, once he has one, all the others at his level also have to get one!"

Quite often, these other machines aren't used by the people for whom they were intended; instead, they are appropriated by juniors. "I asked for a PC," says Vandana Bhatnagar, a manager at a foreign bank, "but they said there was a laptop available, so why not use that." She feels it is a decent substitute for a PC, though it's a bore to set it up every day. D. Sriram, media director, Madison Advertising, is another heavy user who admits that he uses it as a substitute for a PC. "I use it to work at home a lot, but I'd probably be better off with a proper desktop." But as computer industry professionals point out, using a laptop as an expensive desktop substitute is hardly doing justice



example, has become so addicted that he's found it necessary to buy laptops for his associates. Ashok

## Laptop language

**Laptops:** They don't exist. Not if you're a computer junkie anyway. Years ago, side by side with the dinosaurs, there existed genuine laptops. These were stripped down PCs which were heavy and hard to use. Toshiba and Compaq then started re-engineering them to produce genuinely lightweight machines measuring 8-by-11 inches, the size of an American notebook. Hence, the correct term is notebook computer.

**Screens:** The major cost component. Most users are happy using monochrome screens, but this will probably be inadequate for new software. Two types of colour screens are available — passive (or dual-scan) and active (Thin Film Transistor). Passive has a fuzzier image and is not visible from certain angles. Active screens are ideal but can add up to Rs60,000 in cost. Some manufacturers feel the price of active screens is going to fall sharply in the coming months.

**Track and point devices:** The equivalent of a mouse. External mice can be

attached, but most laptops have a ball-in-socket device called a trackball, generally built-in. Digital and Compaq have models with the trackball in front of the keyboard for ease of use. IBM's Thinkpads use a trackpoint instead, a small button placed in the centre of the keyboard. Apple, the company that introduced the mouse, has done away with it. It's PowerBooks have a trackpad with a sensitive surface that responds directly to finger movements.

**Keyboard:** Laptops contain fewer keys than a desktop — usually 84 as opposed to 101. IBM's latest model, the Butterfly, offers a keyboard that, as the name suggests, folds out to near-normal size.

**Batteries:** Most laptops use nickel metal hydride which can be recharged and give about two hours of power. All laptops come with cables for mains connections, but there should also be adaptors to prevent problems with plugpoints while travelling. All laptops must include power-saving features like screens that go blank if left idle for a while.

**Others:** The small size necessitates keeping optional features to a minimum.

But they are all available as peripherals. Instead of plugs, nearly all laptops do this now through PCMCIA slots, flat apertures into which the 'cards' of the input or output devices can be fitted. These include fax/modems, floppy disk and hard disk drives. Laptops with separate floppy drives are known as sub-notebooks. With multimedia becoming the rage, the latest models allow for CD-ROM drives and superior sound and graphics. Docking stations are a useful new feature that enable the laptop to be connected to a larger desktop monitor in the office.

**Upgradeability & repair:** The speed of change with laptop technology ensures rapid obsolescence and the only thing to do is to ensure one's model is upgradeable. But while this is simple with desktops, laptop technology is so much more advanced that one generally has to go back to the original manufacturer. Tempted by the substantially lower prices, travellers abroad often think of buying a laptop and smuggling it in, only to be left high and dry when repairs are needed.

**Brands:** The market is being flooded by

to the machine.

There are, however, companies like Global Tele-Systems which have started using laptops in a radically different way. Whereas a mega corporation like Hindustan Lever has around 20 laptops strictly reserved for senior management, this Rs125-crore telecommunications company has placed an order for 200 to be given to all managers and salesmen. Fritz D'Silva, joint MD, feels the efficiency gained will more than compensate for the big investment. "We want to give everyone the ability to compute, to make presentations, to forecast, to number crunch or whatever, and to do it whenever and wherever they want," he says.

A major benefit, says D'Silva, comes from the way laptops improve the quality of presentations. Using programmes like PowerPoint, highly sophisticated presentations can be made to clients individually. For group presentations, the screen can be projected by hooking the laptop up to a Liquid Crystal Display panel placed on top of an overhead projector. Changes can then be made as the presentation goes along. Almost as effective as the actual

suppliers, most of them simply importing the machines in one piece. As a result, the most advanced models are available in India — at a price! But this means that anyone setting out to buy one is quickly reduced to total confusion by the range of makes and models available.

Compaq, distributed by Tangerine Computers, has three ranges — Aero (sub-notebooks), Contura and the top-end Elites. Here they face stiff competition from IBM's Thinkpads (distributed by Zenith and several others like Microtech) and Digital's super-thin HiNote Ultra range. The Korean Hyundai Neurons and the Japanese NEC Versa models are distributed by Hyundai Byte, while the Taiwanese Acer group has formed a joint venture with Wipro. For Apple diehards, Wipro (through Wipro Infotech) also distributes the Mac Powerbook range. And finally for those who want to stay *desi*, several suppliers import the components and assemble the machines in India, selling them under their own name. Magnerra and Zenith are the largest of these.

## Still confused?

**W**ant to buy a laptop but confused about how to go about it? *Business India* asked the distributors for their advice.

- 1) Evaluate your needs realistically. Laptops are cute, but a desktop may give you all you want at less cost.
- 2) Decide your budget and stick to it. In a market where technology is changing so fast, you can lose control of your costs easily.
- 3) Seek advice from a knowledgeable person and check out all the models. (Since laptops are both high value and portable, you can easily get all the salesmen falling over themselves to come to your office and demonstrate them!)
- 4) Use one and see how you like the

features. Is the trackball in a comfortable position? Is the screen readable? How heavy is it? Will you need to carry it separately or will it fit in your bag? With so many options around one can almost assemble a laptop with features to suit one's needs.

5) Buy a recognised brand. If you travel a lot get an international warranty. Make sure there's a good service facility available.

6) Don't just buy the cheapest. With a very high obsolescence rate, manufacturers generally sell the older models off cheap. Some of these may well suit your needs, but do consider how it will handle future software needs.

7) And finally resign yourself to the fact that anything you buy is going to be obsolete pretty fast!

presentation, D'Silva points out, is the fact that the salesman is using a laptop in this way. "It tells the customer that these guys are responsive, that they're on the ball," he says. And a single large sale from such a presentation, says D'Silva, can more than pay for the cost of the laptops.

Global has avoided hiring secretaries so that people start using their laptops. Nishith Desai, head of a Bombay-based law firm, did so for an even simpler reason. "Our office is in Nariman Point," he says, "and real estate is too expensive. We simply didn't have the space for people." Desai decided to experiment with laptops two years ago. He encouraged his secretaries to upgrade themselves to lawyers, and then simply didn't replace them. Everyone was given laptops with fax/modem attachments and told they had to do their own work, at home or at the office.

Desai says the experiment has been outstandingly successful. Today, 11 lawyers fit into just 630 square feet. Working at home evidently suits a lot of his people. "We employ quite a few women," says Desai, "who have household responsibilities. A laptop at home ensures that they can take care of them, even while doing their office work." Since most of their practice is with international firms, he points out, they may need to work round the clock, but this way they needn't keep worrying about getting home in time. "Technology has greatly improved our efficiency as well as improving the quality of our

life," says Desai.

Nor is he stopping here; he will be getting new laptops, this time equipped with CD-ROM and multimedia facilities. "A lot of international law texts are available on CD-ROM and now we can access them," he says. "The multimedia will help presentations, but more than that I wanted to let our people enjoy it." While a lot of bosses dismiss laptops, saying they will just be used for games, Desai is one who encourages his people to do so. "If it doesn't affect their work, and if it reduces stress levels," he asks, "why should I mind?"

There's one brand new group of users who will, hopefully, use their laptops for more than playing games. The Central government has placed a huge order for over 800 laptops — hi-tech, high-cost IBM Thinkpads — for every member of Parliament. And according to Bhandari, the Prime Minister is an enthusiastic user. "When he went to Thailand, just before he left, we got a call asking for two machines urgently. We rushed these across and he presented them to the King and the President of Thailand," he recalls. Not to be outdone, the government of Maharashtra is apparently considering ordering laptops for all MLAs.

If this trend catches on — there are over 4,000 MLAs in the country — sales projections may need drastic revision. But even in its absence, the growing corporate market for laptops ought to keep distributors smiling.

■ VIKRAM DOCTOR