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Flash memory drives find friends fast

By Gregory M. Lamb, The Christian Science Monitor

Call it memory on a stick — or maybe on a key chain. In the past two years tiny devices about the size of a pack of gum have begun to revolutionize the way people use computers. Stick one into a slot in nearly any computer and you can download or upload music, games, photos, graphics, text, even video — anything that can be stored on a computer's hard drive.

Business people use them to transport documents and presentations. Students take school projects with them in their pocket. These tiny devices are almost certain to make floppy discs and CDs quickly obsolete as ways to transfer data from computer to computer.

More than 60 million of these USB (Universal Serial Bus) flash drives — also know as pocket drives, thumb drives, jump drives, memory sticks, or pen drives — are expected to be sold this year. Prices range from under \$20 to several hundred dollars, depending on the amount of memory and features.

A flash drive with two gigabytes of memory can hold about 33 hours of recorded music or about 660 three-minute songs. At the high end, a five-gigabyte device from Seagate Technologies that looks like a high-tech yo-yo actually contains a miniature hard drive. It can hold an entire Hollywood movie.

"The flash drives have been a godsend," says Tom Gutnick, a computer consultant in Arlington, Va., who's used them to take presentations to clients as well as to transport files to the class he teaches on Web design at a local community college.

Not only are flash drives convenient, they're also "cool," says Rob Pait, director of global consumer electronics for Seagate. "I know when I'm using mine I see people shooting looks at it out of the corner of their eyes and wondering what it is and what it's doing."

Besides being clipped to a key chain, the little gadgets can be worn on a neck strap. Sometimes they double as a pen, Swiss Army-style knife, or even as a wristwatch. They're also being offered as combination devices with portable music players (the new iPod Shuffle can be used as a flash drive, for example) and digital cameras, both of which already rely on flash memory.

But some industry insiders see an even bigger future for the tiny devices. Instead of taking a laptop on trips, it's possible to just stick a flash drive into a pocket or purse and turn whatever computer you sit down at into a copy of your own.

That means all your e-mails would be there, all your files, all your Web-browsing favorites. When you leave, everything slips back onto the flash drive. The computer keeps no trace that you have used it. When you return to your own computer, all your programs are automatically updated — "synched" — from your flash drive.

Kate Purmal, CEO of U3, an organization creating a new standard for configuring

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flash drives, knows just how convenient that can be.

When her daughter recently borrowed her computer, she found that the next time she used it, many of the settings had been changed and new programs added. If each family member has a personal flash drive enabled with its own program, each could use the same home computer without "messing it up" for the others, she says.

A company called Xmultiple has even introduced flash drives that can download data between them without the use of a PC.

Standing in the way of this enticing vision are two S-words: standardization and security, says Steffen Hellmold, president of the USB Flash Drive Alliance, another industry group trying to get manufacturers to agree on setting standards for applications on flash drives.

Carrying around programs on a key chain poses a potential security problem for both individuals (will my stuff get lost?) and the computers they might use (infecting a computer with a virus on your flash drive wouldn't be the way to make a friend or a sale). "If I were still doing corporate information security, I'd be losing sleep over those things," Mr. Gutnick, the consultant, says.

Many of the devices already offer password protection and some even use biometrics (fingerprint authorization). The U3 standard will also contain strong security measures, Purmal says. The first U3 products are expected to be on the market by this summer.

Meanwhile, a flash-drive product called Migo already is doing much of what U3 plans to do: imitating your own computer wherever you go. It takes along as much of the user's own e-mails, files, photos, etc., as the memory can hold and makes the host computer look and feel like the user's. It doesn't, however, take applications along, so the host computer has to be equipped with the same program as the user's computer (if you use Microsoft Outlook for e-mail or Office for word processing, the host computer will have to have the same programs, for example).

Teachers love Migo because they can grade papers at home then sync back up with the school's computer the next day, says Joshua Feller, a spokesman for PowerHouse Technologies, which makes Migo. Students can make any computer at the library, computer lab, or anywhere on campus act like their own, including remembering Web-browsing favorites they might have saved for a research project.

When Mr. Feller himself travels, "I no longer carry a laptop," he says. Just a pocket flash drive. "It really did change my life."

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