

# Prices fall as laptop systems gain power

by Mike Musgrove  
and Nicholas Johnston  
The Washington Post

Murphy Meng already had a computer. But then last week he went and bought a second PC. Not another desktop like the one he has at home. Meng, 28, bought what more and more Americans have been buying, a laptop.

Desktop computer sales remained flat in recent years, even dropping 4 percent over the last quarter. But laptop sales have boomed—up 9 percent over that quarter, according to market researchers Gartner Dataquest. And laptop sales are expected to keep climbing in the coming years, growing twice as fast as desktops'.

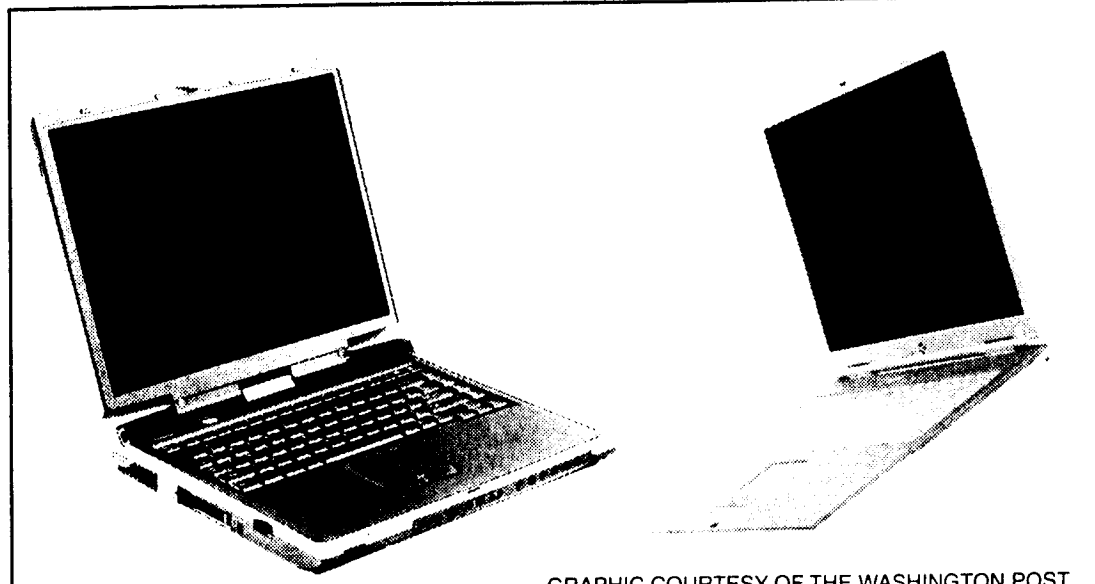
Computers you can carry in your briefcase still account for less than 30 percent of all computer sales, but their latest growth surge comes not from traveling salesmen or road-warrior corporate types. Regular consumers are snapping up portable computers now, according to Charles Smulders, a vice president at Gartner Dataquest.

This is happening in spite of laptops' higher prices—their average selling price of \$1,548 is almost twice the figure for desktops of comparable performance, according to NPDTECHworld.

But a growing number of manufacturers have discovered something that can both narrow that price gap and make almost every computer user a potential laptop convert: Many consumers only need "outlet to outlet" portability. These are generally not the road warriors but home users, who do their computing in a handful of fixed locations, all of which have a power outlet.

That realization has led to a curious hybrid machine. Starting this year, many companies have been building laptops around standard Intel Pentium 4 desktop processors. Desktop processors cost less than mobile processors, so the resulting designs have brought forth a whole new class of cheaper laptops that deliver performance close enough to a desktop's to tempt many buyers.

"The only thing you can't do (on a laptop) right now is DVD creation," said Andy Klopstead, Gateway's marketing manager for mobile products. Klopstead said laptops are even catching on among gamers—a subset of computer users who once steered clear of laptops but who are now attracted to the pos-



GRAPHIC COURTESY OF THE WASHINGTON POST

Many companies have been building laptops around standard desktop processors. These processors cost less than mobile processors, so the resulting designs have brought forth a whole new class of cheaper laptops that deliver performance close enough to a desktop's to tempt many buyers. Right, Gateway's 450; left, the Toshiba Satellite 1405-S151.

sibility of using wireless networking to go head-to-head against their friends.

The trade-off is that these low-priced, high-powered machines usually exhibit shorter battery life.

"Desktop processors eat up power like there's no tomorrow," said Alan Promisel, a technology analyst with tech research firm IDC. He estimates that laptops with desktop processors get about 1 1/2 hours' worth of life, compared with the three or four hours that processors optimized for laptops get from the same battery.

Some manufacturers are using more powerful batteries to compensate for power-sucking processors—at an additional cost in dollars and weight.

Dell puts more powerful batteries in its laptops that use desktop processors.

"We wanted to preserve that three-hour threshold in battery life," said Ketan Pandya, Dell's marketing manager for consumer notebooks.

Not everyone agrees that's necessary for all machines.

"There is a different set of requirements when you

look at commercial versus home buyers," said Brett Faulk, director of consumer product marketing for notebooks at Hewlett-Packard. "Consumers are more forgiving than corporate or commercial users about battery life, size and weight."

HP's conclusion, said Faulk, is that battery life doesn't matter as much if most of your time on the laptop is going to be spent within reach of an outlet. And most home buyers of laptops are far more concerned with computing power than with battery life.

That was the issue facing Brittney Matthews and her mother one recent afternoon as they looked at laptops at CompUSA in Rockville, Md. Matthews, 17, is starting college in the fall and wants to take a computer with her.

Her mother "wants it to be light," Matthews said, "but I want it speedy."

Promisel, however, criticizes the way PC makers put desktop processors into laptops without informing consumers of the corresponding hit in battery life, calling it a "car-salesman technique." But he concedes, "If you know what you're getting into, it's a

great deal."

Laptop makers aren't exactly trumpeting the news lurking inside some of their products. You can identify a hybrid if its processor isn't specifically described as "mobile" or if its name isn't followed by an "M"—for instance, "Pentium 4-M."

It's too early to tell whether these hybrid laptops will stay welcome on the laps and desks of consumers. But it's a big market, with a variety of needs. Sony, for example, has five types of laptops, ranging from the lightest road warrior model to heavier desktop replacements.

While the desktop market may be somewhat saturated, there's still room for laptops to grow. The rise of cheap, relatively simple wireless networking may lead to laptops taking an even bigger chunk of the computer market down the line. Wireless networking may still be the realm of the early adopter, but it seems to be catching on: Klopstead said that a quarter of Gateway customers opt to have wireless capability added to their laptops, up from 5 percent six months ago.

While there may be cool developments in the future, there are some good deals out there today. Dan de Grandpre, chief executive of the bargain-hunting Web site Dealnews.com, said he has seen "ridiculously aggressive" deals from Dell this summer and many sales from Hewlett-Packard on both HP- and Compaq-branded laptops.

A series of deals on laptops from Dell, HP and Compaq have stayed in the top 10 of Dealnews.com's "reader picks" for most of the summer. One current deal for a Compaq Presario alerts readers to mail-in rebates totaling \$250—taking the price of a notebook from \$1,099.99 down to \$849.99.

Price anxieties eventually drove Matthews and her mom home from CompUSA empty-handed as they pondered extra features, and warranties to cover the computer at school.

De Grandpre, on the other hand, liked the offers he was seeing on his site so much he recently took the plunge. He purchased a laptop for his office, even though he has already experienced a slight twinge of buyer's remorse at the sight of other deals that were just as good or better.

"You have to accept that the great deal you got today will be beat in the next seven days," he said. "But you still got a great deal."



## The Behrend Beacon

will be looking to fill the following positions this semester:

- distribution manager
- assistant news editors
- assistant sports editors
- supplement page editors

Most positions can be taken for credit or are paid \$\$\$.  
-Looks great on a resume!

E-mail: behrcoll5@aol.com

Attn: Rob Wynne

-or- call the Beacon office at 898-6488.

**WHAT A CHILD LEARNS ABOUT VIOLENCE A CHILD LEARNS FOR LIFE.**

Use all the energy and creativity you have to help your child learn violence is wrong. It will never be forgotten. Each day of life teaches them how to live. Don't let violence be a part of their education.

Ad Council 