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TECHBUZZ

Power on Your Keychain: USB Flash Drives

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Remember how great 3 ½ inch disks were? They held far more files than those paper-thin 5 ¼ disks and came in bright plastic colors, to boot. In 2007, though, the poor floppy disk is completely obsolete. They are too small and too fragile. The floppy disk replacement is going to have to offer a lot more than mere storage to compete with e-mail and network drives. Are USB flash drives up to the task?

USB flash drives (also known as USB keys, pen drives, and thumb drives) are portable storage devices with “flash” memory chips. Flash memory keeps all of its data, even without power. USB drives can be plugged into nearly any USB port. Most USB drives are about 3 inches long and are about the size and shape of a pack of gum.

Unlike CDs and floppies, USB flash drives cannot be scratched. They handle casual abuse very well (I’ve heard of cases where they survived laundry machines, but don’t try this at home). The drives can store any kind of file from about any operating system, including Windows, Linux, and Mac.

That said, the drives have some problems, such as a limited life span (they will eventually use up the number of possible rewrites). However, security is probably the biggest issue. USB drives are easy to lose, but users tend to still think of them as disks, something easily lost and replaced. USB drives can hold far more data, some of which is likely to be sensitive. Recently, somewhere in Madagascar, a professor lost a USB drive containing the Social Security numbers of thousands of students. Encrypting data and enabling passwords on USB drives can help keep security risks to a minimum.

In 2001, USB flash drives cost \$70 for 16 MB, and \$200 for 64 MB. Now they range from \$5 for 128 MB, to \$250 for 16 G. Because the smaller drives are so inexpensive, many will give away free drives much like free pens or post-it notes. Often, the free drives will contain demo programs or information about products.

Vendors today offer many variations of the basic USB drive. Some are practical, such as USB plugs that retract or swing in to prevent damage. Others offer additional security; SanDisk, for example, sells USB flash drives that can read fingerprints. Other vendors are playful, offering drives shaped like sushi, drives made of wood, or even drives inside dolls (remove the head to use).

Most people use USB drives to transfer data. These drives are perfect when working with files too large to be sent over e-mail, or when using information too sensitive to be stored on network drives.

The drives can also be used as mini-hard drives, complete with applications and operating systems. *Connecting* (the newsletter for the Computing Services Special Interest Section of AALL) recently featured “Life on a Stick,” Susan Boland’s article describing how to turn USB flash drives into portable application devices. Instead of installing applications on a PC, simply launch them from a USB drive. Programs available include Firefox, Open Office, “Wiki on a Stick,” and virus protection. Users can even create a “boot disk” to run Linux directly from a USB drive.



USB flash drive

Photo courtesy of Debbie Ginsberg

Carrying portable applications on USB drives ensures that favorite programs are always available. Programs used from the USB drive also leave no traces on a PC – personal information is not stored in the Windows registry, and no cookies are left on the hard drive. Or, install large programs on the USB key and keep Windows from becoming bogged down with extra installation files.

Some USB drives now come with “U3,” an application designed to manage and launch portable programs. Users with U3-enabled USB drives can use these programs to make any other workstation function much like their own (but note this is PC-only).

Some libraries are starting to lend USB drives to library users for temporary use. Libraries can also buy USB drives in bulk to give away to incoming students, new attorneys, or other library users. The drives can be branded with a library logo and can include research pathfinders, multimedia presentations, and even a set of useful portable applications.

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Prices for USB drives have dropped dramatically in the last 5 years. The drives are faster and offer plenty of features. Compared to floppies, USB drives have grown at an amazing rate. We will likely see USB drives as large as many current hard drives in the not-too-distant future, perhaps under \$100.

Will it be long before we can fit an entire computer on a USB drive? We already can! A recent *Wired* article, "The World's Tiniest PCs", describes a PC that's been built into a thumb drive. The computer is not very powerful, but includes a network port, a monitor port, and even its own USB port. Computer on a keychain, indeed!

**Where to find more portable software:**

- Fragstation: <http://fragstation.org>
- Kikizas: <http://www.kikizas.net/en/usbapps.html>
- No-Install: <http://www.no-install.com/>
- PenDriveApps: <http://www.pendrivaapps.com/>
- Portable Applications List: <http://www.quate.net/newsnet/read.php?30>
- PortableApps.com: <http://portableapps.com/>
(Home of the Portable Apps suite, a bundled collection of portable applications.)
- Portable Apps List: <http://portable-apps.subiectiv.com/page.php?5>
- The Portable Freeware Collection: <http://www.portablefreeware.com/>
- Wikipedia List of Portable Software: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_portable_software

Articles of Interest

- "23 Things to Do with a Thumb Drive." *PC World* 24.2 (2006): 113-16.
- "Small Drives Cause Big Problems." *USA Today* August 16, 2006, sec. Money.
- Blackwell, Gerry. "Thumbing Around." *Canadian Business* 70.20 (2006).
- Boland, Susan. "Life on a Stick." *Connecting* May 2007: 9, available at http://www.aallnet.org/sis/cs-sis/newsletter/2007/2007_May.pdf ■

TECHBUZZ - Free Wiki

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Earlier this year, I embarked on an annotated bibliography project with my co-worker, Susan Boland. To facilitate our communication, and to avoid duplication in our efforts, Susan suggested we utilize a wiki for the project. After some online searching, she came across Zoho.com. According to the "About Us" section at Zoho.com, "Zoho is an Office Productivity Suite from AdventNet Inc. Founded in 1996, AdventNet is headquartered in Pleasanton, CA with offices in North America, Europe and Asia. AdventNet focuses on building affordable software for businesses."

One of the products offered at Zoho.com is a freely accessible wiki. For the bibliography, we only utilized the wiki. I must confess that, although I am writing this, Susan was the better wiki user. I know the immense benefits of technology in our profession, but sometimes I don't have the energy to learn the newest or latest technology. That was not a problem with this site. Once I registered (free), I was able to easily navigate the wiki site. It has a very adaptable format. Users create their own pages and can control access to the material by limiting those who can link to it. The editor feature allowed for easy updating of the materials. A minor downside was some font formatting problems, but these were not insurmountable. Zoho.com lists the following features of the wiki:

Easy to use WYSIWYG editing

Create, edit or re-format contents using our WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editor

Version your Wiki pages

Have multiple versions of your content pages, not multiple copies

Group Wiki

Create Groups. Add, edit and share contents among your group

More structured wiki with subpages

Organize your site by having subpages for each page

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