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Docs still searching for ideal mobile computing device

By *Joseph Conn* / February 4, 2005

Docs who love computers just won't wander without their Palm Pilots, but a growing number of them -- particularly those in office-based practices -- are also pushing the tech envelope with wireless laptops, according to a recent survey. Meanwhile, their quest for the killer computing device continues, says Gregg Malkary, managing director of Spyglass Consulting Group, a market research and consulting firm in Menlo Park, Calif.

"There is no ideal mobile-communication computing device," Malkary said. "They all have benefits and they all have deficiencies."

Malkary said he worked with informatics groups and technology vendors as well as physician-to-physician referrals to come up with 102 tech-savvy physicians who agreed to participate in the survey. They were queried

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Trends	on what mobile healthcare information
Organizations	technologies they were using, their likes and dislikes about their systems and devices, and where they thought IT was headed in the future. The survey period began in September 2004 and lasted three months.
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Profile	Of the participating physicians using mobile devices:
Editorials	
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 96% use some sort of electronic database to check for drug indications, contraindications, payer formulary information, etc.,
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Briefly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 73% use electronic reference manuals,
Letters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 64% use a medical calculator,
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Modern Healthcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 17% use a charge capture system, and
Business Insurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 13% use an e-prescribing device.
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Archives	Far and away, personal digital assistants with the PalmOS operating system were the most popular mobile IT platform, used by 65% of the physicians in the survey, followed by tablet-based personal computers, 20%; and Pocket PCs, 12%. Of the users of PalmOS devices, 73% carried Palm Pilots while 20% had Sony PDAs.
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Surveys / Charts	Still, Malkary said, there is dissatisfaction in the ranks of the power users, who pine for the one device that can do it all.
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About Us	"With the PDA, it's ideal for a stand-alone clinical reference, but it's difficult to access more robust clinical applications, like electronic medical records. There's too much scrolling and the navigation is too difficult.
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Editorial Calendar	"You want the smallness, because it's convenient to carry, but what the vendors are doing is adding more detailed applications, but it is turning against them."
Reprints/Newsfeeds	Physicians don't want to fool with a PDA if the interaction is going to require more than a few simple commands, Malkary said. "That comment came up all across the country," he said. For more involved order entries, patient documentation, or other, more complicated functions of an EMR system, "they'd rather go to a terminal, if one is available." Another thing that jumped out at Malkary was the rise in popularity of tablet PCs. Though wireless PCs were carried by just 20% of physician power users, according to the latest survey, that percentage was four times higher than the



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percentage of tablet PC users in a similar survey completed in November 2003, Malkary said.

Among outpatient physicians, 77% of those surveyed responded that tablet PCs were suitable for daily clinical usage, while 51% of hospital-based physicians indicated they were unsuitable for the job.

"Tablets are getting more traction with outpatient physicians because they have much greater control of their environment," Malkary said.

Weight and shortness of battery life, remain issues with tablet PCs, which still typically weigh several pounds, but these drawbacks can be offset by office-based physicians.

"In an outpatient environment, (the physician) owns his own office. He has some space to place the device. In a hospital, you're going floor to floor, department to department, you might be walking for miles."

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