PDAs: Back To The Basics

A recent article on Palm247.com discussed moving to the Palm Z22 as a method of simplifying things got me thinking about just how I use my PDA. I have been reading David Allanâ??s book "Getting Things Done" (GTD), and it has prompted some serious pondering about the fact that so many things in my life are simply way too complicated. Iâ??m trying to make "simplicity" my new mantra, and one area of complexity that I have noticed is my use of my Palm PDA. Read on to see how I have simplified by PDA use by embracing a more simple PDA â?¦

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I am a long-time user and proponent of PDAs with my first being a Casio "Zoomer" PDA way back in 1993.

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The Casio Zoomer was an amazing PDA that was unfortunatly overshadowed by the Apple Newtonâ??s popularity. Interestingly, the Zoomer had an optional version of the Graffiti handwriting recognition software which was later incorporated into all PalmOS devices.

In 1996, I next purchased Palmâ??s original Pilot 1000 sold by US Robotics:

{mosimage}

"In the day" the Pilot 1000 was a stunning, amazing device. Its power through simplicity reigned through quite a number of succeeding Palmâ??s models. But then something happened: feature overload. Along came color screens, expansion slots, MP3 playback, photo and video capture, video playback, Bluetooth, WiFi, phone integration, internal hard drivesâ?¦the list goes on.

I then progressed through these PDAâ??s:

Palm iii	Palm Vx	Sony NX70V
{mosimage}	{mosimage}	{mosimage}

Palm Tungsten T3	Palm Tungsten C
{mosimage}	{mosimage}

While the added features are certainly high on the cool scale, I consistently find that Iâ??m simply not using most of these extended features. Some features are certainly quite useful, (I find a nice color screen to be nuch more readable than the original monochrome screens) but I find that most are simply not "essentials", and I never use them.

So this got me thinking about what features do I really need, and what features are just "fluff" that serve as nothing but distractions? And thatâ??s important to me, because I find myself very easily distracted "by the device" instead of actually productively "using the device." In trying to achieve more simplicity, I decided to choose a device that would provide the functions I need while providing few extras so as not to be distracted from real productivity. So, I decided to take the plunge and convert from the gee-wiz, feature-laden Palm Tungsten T3 to Palmâ??s latest "entry level model", the Z22.

{mosimage}

So far, I have no regrets!

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Iâ??m not going to review the Z22 hereâ??Iâ??m covering that in greater depth in another articleâ??but I am going to explain how some of the Z22â??s features (or lack thereof!) are turning out to be very useful and productive.

Size

The first item of note is the Z22â??s size. Wow! This is the smallest PalmOS PDA (save the wristwatch version) and I really find it stunning. Everything is proportioned nicely, and it looks very slick (kind of "iPod-ish".) It fits in my hands very well, and it is very front-pocketable. The simple fact that I can easily pocket the Z22 means that Iâ??m more likely to have it with me, and Iâ??ll be more likely to use it productively. While I was never ashamed of proudly sporting a large, belt-clipped PDA, being able to comfortably pocket the Z22 certainly draws less attention, and really reduces the overall Geek Factor.

Memory

The next item of note is the Z22â??s limited memory. While 20MB can certainly hold a lot of data, coming down from a T3 with 58MB of space and my added 256MB SD card was difficult. The Z22â??s 20MB seemed, at first glance, paltry. But letâ??s remember my goal: Simplicity. Over the last decade, I have amassed a large collection of PalmOS applications, so this presented an excellent opportunity to re-assess just what applications would be useful, productive, and non-distracting. The end result is that I now have all of the applications and data that I need with over 3MB free space to spare! Iâ??ll detail my setup belowâ?¦.

Screen

The final item of note is the Z22â??s screen. After owning several high-resolution PalmOS PDAs, I thought that reverting back to a 160Ã?160 screen would be huge step backward. It turns out that I was dead wrong. The colors render just fine, and I can very easily view all the information I need to view in any of the

installed applications without any problems. No, I wonâ??t be showing off high-resolution photos or videos, but remember the goal of simplicity. I simply donâ??t a high-resolution screen to be productive with it. My only real complaint is that there is some "bleeding" on the screen, and text is definitely not as sharp as a high-resolution screen, but it is very functional, and surprisingly pleasing to look at.

As a side note, I do want to address PDA "protection". Out of the box, the Z22 comes with no case or screen cover. Iâ??ve always been a proponent of PDA cases, so I purchased Palmâ??s Air Case. The Air Case is a clear plastic case that completely covers the Z22, and has a "flip" cover on the front. Itâ??s made of the same material from which they make safety glasses, so it offers great protection, especially when in your pocket. You can read a more detailed review of the Air Case <>. This combination really canâ??t be beat for form and function.

Applications

So what do I have installed? Remember that my goal was to strip back all of the superfluous stuff that caused me distractions and prevented me from being really productive with my PDA. So, I assessed that I had, and came up with the following list of applications that I find to be functional and useful:

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ZLauncher
(Zhangzhe Technology)
While this application could go somewhat against the "simplicity" concept because of its actual complexity, it provides form and function that I really like, and it integrates some essential tools that I find indispensible (notably, file management.) Its rich feature set, though complex, can be tailored down to a fairly minimal view that is functional, pleasing, and doesnâ??t distract.

Hi-Launcher
(RNS::)
I purchased this popup launcher long, long ago and havenâ??t used in a while, but on the Z22, Iâ??m finding it to be invaluable! I assigned it to "trigger" when pressing the Contacts (right) hard button, so I now have one-touch access to my most-used apps. No more fumbling with the stylus to launch a quickly-needed app. This really more than makes up for the limited number of hard buttons on the Z22. Regardless of what launcher app you use, I highly recommend this one! ***UPDATE: This is an essential. I use it daily, and it has proven to be a true gem of an application!***

PIM
(Palm)
Surprisingly, I find the native PIM applocations to be exceptionally useful. I have been a long-time user and proponent of Pimlico Softwareâ??s DateBk, but I find that the installed PIM applications have evolved into surprisingly robust applications that do almost all I need. For example, the Calendarâ??s "Agenda" view provides an at-a-glance list of upcoming appointments and pending Tasks which, though concise, looks great on the 160Ã?160 screen.

LifeBalance
(LlamaGraphics)
This is a very interesting application that I am demoing. When I first looked at this program, it was confusing and not very useful to meâ??I just didnâ??t get it. But after finally understanding the GTD methods, this application makes total sense. In fact, its execution is really how Palmâ??s Tasks application should work. Iâ??m still demoing it, so weâ??ll see where I go with it long-termâ?¦.***UPDATE: I find that though LifeBalance is an excellent application (and I really wish some of its functionality could be rolled into Palmâ??s PIM) I I reverted to using Tasks and Memos to handle things. The main reason is synchronizing: Having everything sync with Lotus Notes or Outlook keeps things consolidated and simple. Having to maintain data in yet another Windows application reduces my productivity.***
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MyBible
(Laridian)
I installed the KJV and Life Application Notes files, and they take up a HUGE amount of spaceâ??over 9MB! But, it is important to me to have this, so Iâ??m willing to devote the space.

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mNotes
(Common Time)
mNotes is essential for syncing the Z22 with Lotus Notes at work. For Outlook users, other excellent solutions exist.

Note Studio
(Dogmelon)
I am demoing this application to see if it will be useful for me for taking and maintaining notes. It provides a simple interface with a Wiki-like structure that could me manage notes efficiently. Itâ??s kinda pricy, but its power through simplicity might prove very userful. ***UPDATE: I decided that maintaining memos works just fine. Though I do Wish that Memos had wiki-like links, in trying to simplify, itâ??s a level of complexity that I simply donâ??t find useful at this time.***

Other Applications
I also have several other useful applications and some small games to kill time when Iâ??m waiting in a line or trying to fall asleep. (Come on, you have to have some diversion!)

The Benefits

I find two main "features" that will benefit me in moving to the Z22: Design limitiations and size. Accepting the imposed design limitations has made me re-think how I use a PDA. Itâ??s no longer the photo-displaying, video-playing, information grabbing, gameing, wireless data repository behemoth that I used to have. Itâ??s now a lean productivity device that I can use and trust. And because the Z22 is so easily pocketable and easy to use, Iâ??ll have it with me all the time, and Iâ??ll be more likely to use it.

I am hoping that combining these benefits will give me a device that I can truely consider to be my "trusted place" to keep my thoughts, ideas, tasks, actions, etc. You see, one of the key GTD concepts is to get all

of that "stuff" you constantly think about, dwell on, and juggle around in your head, out of your head and into a "trusted place" so that you donâ??t have to waste time and effort keeping track of it all. For me, a solid, simple PDA just might be the technical solution I have been looking for. Of course, being successful with GTD concepts means understanding that the solution is never in the divice or method itself, but how you implement and actually use it.

Conclusion

While I cannot say that the Z22 is the solution to simplification, I can say that in moving to the Z22, my PDA use has become simpler and easierâ??and I like it. I believe that "power users" should take a step back from time to time to assess just what they really use in their PDAs. I think they would be surprised at what is useful and what is not. And at under $100.00, itâ??s not that steep a price to pay to try out a Z22.

Update: 2006-04-18

I received an email from Mike Rohde of rohdesign.com , and it seems that moving back to more simpler PDAs just may be a new trend! Check out Mikeâ??s article about how he transitioned from a lost Zire 72 to a Sony Clie N610C.

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If anyone has any stories of their own about intentionally moving to simpler PDAs, let em know, and Iâ??ll add a link here to your article!

Update: 2006-12-11

Iâ??m *really* liking the Z22, and I find that Iâ??m simply not craving the bells and whistles I used to have. Yes, there are times when I miss my Clieâ??s camera. Yes, I sometimes miss the Tungsten Câ??s keyboard. Yes, I miss the SD card memory expansion. And yes, I do wish it had a high-resolution screen. But you know, the Z22 really gives me what I need, and I donâ??t find its simplicity limiting. And Iâ??m still amazed by its excellent pocketablilty.

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