

■ Netbooks (mini PCs)

Netbooks are the latest rage these days. As an alternative to a laptop, Netbooks or mini-PCs definitely serve a purpose but cannot be considered a replacement for a traditional laptop or desktop computer. Given their functionality and low cost, however, Netbooks are a notable piece of equipment for both businesses and consumers. We'll discuss the advantages and disadvantages of Netbooks in this newsletter.

What is a Netbook?

A Netbook (*Figure 1*) is a portable computer similar to a laptop but much smaller, lighter, and more energy efficient. They are primarily suited for web browsing, checking email and keeping track of calendar or To Do lists.

PC and laptop manufacturers have recognized the desire many people have to customize their electronics; Netbooks are no exception. Traditional designs are black, silver and white but you can also find various colors and design motifs. Some are even catering to kids with Nickelodeon, SpongeBob and Disney design motifs.

How are Netbooks Useful?

1. For the price conscious, Netbooks provide Internet connectivity and basic computing tasks for less than the cost of a laptop.
2. For the size conscious, Netbooks are **smaller and lighter** than traditional laptops but provide more functionality than a Smartphone, PDA or Blackberry (although these devices are gaining in functionality every year).
3. Netbooks generally offer much **longer battery life** than most laptops due to their low voltage processor (which is also an indicator for low performance). Some ultraportable laptops are low voltage as well so look at specs carefully to make sure you get the price/performance you're looking for.



Figure 1. Netbook, on right, compared with a full size laptop.

4. If you're looking for an energy efficient way to stay connected, Netbooks are the way to go. At a measly **2.5 watts**, Netbooks far surpass power hungry desktops (some use 130 watts). Most laptops range from 20-30 watts but some can surpass 100 watts (mostly depending on the hardware requirements, if you're using AC or the battery, and which programs you're running).
5. If you're pretty rough with your electronics, you'll appreciate the availability of **solid state drives (SSD)** as an alternative to a **hard disk drive (HDD)**. SSDs are more durable since they lack moving parts, tend to have a longer lifespan over an HDD, generally weigh less than an HDD, offer lower power use, and offer better read/write performance especially for video.

Solid state drives are considerably more expensive though and do not offer nearly as much storage space as hard disk drives so you'll have to weigh your cost/performance needs to see if getting an SSD is worth the premium price tag.

■ Website Worth Watching

- www.epeat.net – Using 24 environmental criteria, this site evaluates and reports on the following electronics: desktop and laptop computers, thin clients, workstations and computer monitors.

The site puts products into Gold, Silver and Bronze categories to allow users to easily evaluate, compare and review products based on toxic materials used, recycling practices and more.

6. Other individuals who may benefit from a Netbook:

- those who can't afford their network provider's data plan anymore and they don't have a Wi-Fi enabled Smartphone but still need to check email/surf the web on-the-go.
- those who find their Smartphone or cell phone is too small for web browsing and other tasks and they're frustrated with typing on such small keys.

What are the Disadvantages of Netbooks?

1. Netbooks do not provide the same computing power of a laptop or desktop computer. If you're accustomed to having multiple programs open simultaneously, play graphic intensive games, professionally edit video or photos, or engage in desktop publishing activities (creating newsletters, advertisements, brochures, etc.), a Netbook isn't suitable. If portability is a concern, you can find high end, expensive laptops that may be suitable for these tasks. More often than not though, you'll need to stick with a desktop computer to get the best performance/price ratio for these activities.
2. Many people find that the small screen size, 7-10", is just not adequate for viewing most websites and documents (unless you enjoy scrolling). If you're accustomed to a 19" or 22" monitor at home or work, a Netbooks' screen will feel miniscule. You're better off with a lower end laptop with a 15-17" screen.
3. Most Netbooks do not offer an optical drive (either CD or DVD) so you're constrained to installing programs over the Internet or using the USB drive exclusively. In a pinch you can always buy an external optical drive (that plugs in via USB). For many people though, this is just one more device to keep track of and one more added cost. If you envision needing an optical drive, look at a laptop instead. NOTE: Without an optical drive, updating older Netbooks to Windows 7 will be tricky. Microsoft is considering having a downloadable file that can be saved to a USB drive.
4. The keyboards on Netbooks are condensed – some manufacturers eliminate keys or shrink them so that only small fingers can navigate comfortably.
5. Although Netbooks are small, you still need a dedicated case or purse to carry one – they won't fit in your pocket like a PDA or Smartphone.

Comparison between Netbooks and Laptops

Main Specifications	Netbooks	Laptops
Weight	2 - 4 lbs	4 - 12 lbs
OS	Linux, Windows XP, Windows 7	Linux, Windows, Mac
Screen Size	8 - 10" LCD	12 - 19" LCD
Processor	Intel Atom or Celeron	Intel Core 2 duo
Memory	1 GB RAM	2 - 4 GB RAM
Hard Drive	160 GB HDD or 16 GB SSD	60 – 500 GB HDD
Optical Drive	None	DVD, DVD±RW
Battery Life	5 - 9 hours	2 - 8 hours
Price	\$300 or less	\$500 or more

Netbooks may also include: Wi-Fi (802.11b/g/n wireless - for connecting through wireless routers or at Hotspots such as cafés, airports, libraries, etc), Bluetooth, Wireless Broadband (provided by cellular carriers like Verizon and AT&T), USB ports, Ethernet port, VGA port (for attaching an external monitor), Webcam, microphone jack, Secure Digital card slot, touchscreen technology.

Laptops have the same features above and usually better quality components. In addition, laptops offer: Firewire/HDMI ports, audio/video I/O ports, PC or Express card slot, Blu-ray drive, advanced graphics card, fingerprint reader.

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