

# Death of the desktop?

*As laptops climb to dominance, desktop PCs face obsolescence*

BY KELVIN SOH  
REUTERS



Scenes from a Taipei computer store last week. Portability, wireless technology and ever lower prices have made laptops the preferred option for millions of computer users across the globe.

PHOTOS: REUTERS



The age of the desktop PC appears to be over as its more portable cousin, the laptop, surges ahead with consumers clamoring for lightweight computers in funky designs for use at home, in cafes and on the train to work.

Not a single desktop model figured on online shopping portal Amazon.com's top 10 selling PC and hardware list the weekend before Christmas, while seven laptop models made the list.

It was yet another sign that the former dominance of desktop PCs is fading as wireless advances and lower prices make laptops the preferred option for millions of PC users around the world.

"On both price and performance, laptops are so competitive now it's surprising they weren't able to catch up with desktops even earlier," said iSuppli analyst Peter Lin.

"The ability to surf the Internet wirelessly in public places, the need to be able to take your office out with you when you travel, and an increasing range of notebook computers have all led to lower desktop sales."

Laptops posted a milestone in the third quarter of last year, passing desktop PC sales for the first time, according to research group iSuppli.

With an entry-level price of US\$300 for some basic models, laptops should bolster their position this year. They are forecast to take up about 55 percent of all

computer shipments, according to data tracking firm IDC.

Many companies eagerly awaiting the era of the laptop are in Taiwan, maker of about 80 percent of the world's laptop PCs. They include the world's top two contract manufacturers, Quanta (廣達電腦) and Compal Electronics (仁寶電腦), and two of the most aggressive laptop brands, Acer (宏碁) and Asustek (華碩電腦).

While those firms have seen their market share rise, the world's top two PC makers overall, Hewlett-Packard and Dell, have seen their share shrink.

Other companies that produce parts such as motherboards for bulky desktop PCs are already switching production to parts for other electronic gadgets such as iPhones.

While laptops used to cost more than double that of a desktop with equivalent processing power, advances in technology and economies of scale have dragged prices down so much that little price differentiation exists today for most consumers looking for a daily use PC, analysts say.

"It's just evolutionary I suppose," said Gartner analyst Tracy Tsai. "Things have reached a point where the price difference is no longer as pronounced as before for many consumers, and the average person is more likely to choose the option that offers him portability over the one that doesn't."

To keep their growth coming, Acer, Asustek and others vying

for laptop dominance are increasingly looking to segmentation, taking aim at the wide range of computer buyers.

The runaway success of low-cost mini notebooks, initially derided by many industry watchers but now one of the fastest growing categories, could foreshadow a coming boom in products offering a wide range of prices and functions.

"There is incredible choice in the notebook space now," said IDC analyst Richard Shim. "You can get notebooks at every inch size from 5-inch to 20-inch."

Alex Gruzen, Dell's manager for consumer products, agreed that the days when his company could offer laptops "in the same shades of gray" are coming to an end.

Segmentation comes in both form and substance. In the former, Asustek offers a bamboo-cased laptop for the environmentally conscious. HP has tied up with designer Vivienne Tam to release the "world's first digital clutch," a notebook designed to look like a woman's handbag.

On the more technical front, companies are offering an ever-wider range of specialized laptops in varying sizes, processing speeds, wireless capabilities and prices. Battery life also coming into play, with HP recently announcing that one of its notebooks had broken the 24-hour barrier.

Faster boot-up times and features such as touch screens are also being touted as companies try

to convert former desktop users and build new markets.

As portability becomes the norm, some are asking if there's any room left for desktops in the brave new era of laptops.

Salesmen at Taipei's Guanghua Computer Market (光華商場), one of the city's top PC hang-outs, said hardcore computer game addicts may be one of the few groups to keep buying desktops that offer greater processing power for memory-intensive applications.

"Hardly anyone buys desktops anymore," said Elton Tsai, gesturing towards the solitary HP desktop sitting in his shop amid rows of laptops.

"Anyone who is enough of a geek to want real processing power can probably assemble his own computer, saving himself at least a few thousand Taiwan dollars in the process," Tsai said.

But not everyone believes the desktop, which was first introduced in the 1970s, will soon be relegated to the junkyard of history. After all, desktops can still offer substantial savings, especially for those who are handy with a screwdriver.

"How can a laptop compete with a desktop on price?" asked Gartner analyst Lillian Tay.

"Especially in the emerging markets where price is a consideration, laptops simply cannot compete on price with a group of people who slap a motherboard, a hard drive and a few chips together to get a desktop," she said.

## Murphy's Law turns 60

*Both correct and self-proving, the simple brilliance of Murphy's Law is its universal applicability*

BY JON HENLEY  
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Case in point: Murphy's Law was borne out on Monday as travelers faced lengthy delays at Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport after the National Immigration Agency's computer system crashed.

PHOTO: YAO KAI-SHOU, TAIPEI TIMES

Among the many fine anniversaries in prospect this year, not the least is the 60th birthday of Murphy's Law, alternatively — though erroneously — known as Sod's Law or, if you're really into this kind of thing, Finagle's Law.

This is the commonly held perception that the world is inherently a perverse place; in other words, if something can go wrong, it will. The proverbial example of the principle is, of course, that if you drop a slice of toast, it will land buttered side down. There are countless others; people have written entire books of them and Web sites abound (including www.murphys-laws.com, to which my thanks).

The military is fond of: "The more advanced your equipment, the further you will be from civilization when it fails." Parents will relate to: "No child ever throws up in the toilet." Drivers will appreciate: "The other lane is always faster." Shoppers will relate to: "The simpler and quicker your transaction, the more complex and time-consuming the transaction of the person in front of you in the queue."

We can all enjoy: "The paper is strongest along the perforated line," "You always find something in the last place you look" (a necessary corollary of which is: "You will never find something in the last place you look but in the first place, where you did not see it first time around") and (my personal favorite) "Any foreign body in your shoe will invariably work itself into the position where it causes most discomfort."

It is worth noting that there is no point disputing Murphy's Law (ML). It is both correct and self-proving, as can be shown by the following: ML states that if anything can go wrong, it will. ML itself can therefore go wrong. If ML can go wrong, then things can sometimes go right. We know from experience that things do sometimes go right. Ergo, ML can go wrong. Ergo, ML is correct and self-proving.

There is, however, some dispute about its precise origin. The principle it embodies has obviously existed since the dawn of mankind, and dedicated researchers from the American Dialect Society have found it described in print as early as 1877. But according to a fascinating series of articles by one Nick T Sparke in the *Annals of Improbable Research*, there can be little doubt that Murphy's Law as we now know it is named after Edward A. Murphy Jr, a test engineer for the McDonnell Douglas aerospace manufacturer during a series of G-force experiments carried out in 1949 by the US air force to assess the tolerance of the human body to acceleration.

One experiment apparently involved a set of 16 sensors attached to the subject's body. These could be mounted in one of two ways, and one of Murphy's assistants installed all of them the wrong way round, resulting in a zero reading. According to Robert Murphy, Edward's son, the words his father uttered at the time were along the lines of: "If there's more than one way to do a job, and one of those ways will result in disaster, then somebody will do it that way."

This we might term the original Murphy's Law. However George Nichols, another engineer present at the experiment, recalls the phrase as: "If that guy has any way of making a mistake, he will," a rather cruel jibe later more kindly condensed by the McDonnell Douglas team to: "If it can happen, it will happen." Major John Paul Stapp, the subject of the experiment, then reportedly summed up the newly coined law at a press conference some days later as: "Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong."

The first mentions of Murphy's Law in this context occur in print in 1952 and 1955, whereafter it gradually became a commonplace, although in a multitude of variants. Finagle's Law is actually a corollary to Murphy's, and states: "Anything that can go wrong, will — and at the worst possible moment."

All of which, of course, only serves to bear out Murphy's third law of journalism (just invented by me), which reads: "The likelihood of your misquoting someone is directly proportional to their present or future importance."