

Psion must improve the way the Series 5 **connects to a PC**, says an exasperated Barry Fox.

The missing link



They may look cute, but anyone who has actually tried to wordprocess more than a few words on a pocket PC will know that their real value is in providing an easily portable replica of a bulky desktop database. So the portable must

offer a simple way to transfer the data from a PC, while converting it to whatever database format it uses.

Don't be fooled by slick advertising promises for easy transfer. Connection can be a pig and conversion can play havoc with a database.

After literally years of my nagging, Psion does at least now provide a Getting Started guide manual with PsiWin 2.2, the connection package for the Series 5. But it still doesn't warn of the problems that can arise when PsiWin installs on a PC.

The default mode leaves PsiWin always beavering away in the background, hunting all the PC's serial ports for a connection path to the S5. This interferes with any modem already fitted to any port. Judging by what readers wrote when I first raised this after the Series 5 was launched, it catches out many users who suddenly forfeit reliable access to email or the internet.

The trick, buried in a Readme file, is to use PsiWin's menu option and enable connection for only one port; or to use manual connection without auto-searching. Psion argues that most S5 users are newbies who will not have a modem on their PC. This seems hopelessly out-of-date thinking.

I have still not been able to make the infra-red link work. Psion tells me I need a 'fix', but doesn't seem able to tell me what the fix is.

Let's now assume that you are lucky and the connection between your desktop and any-brand pocket PC is working. If the pocket PC provides direct data conversion from whatever database format your desktop PC uses, you're doubly lucky. More likely, you will have to play a trick that's not in the manual.

Use the Esperanto language of all databases, CSV, or comma separated variables. New database software should always be able to read CSV and convert it to its own wacky format. If the process fails with an error message, or mistakes CSV for MS-DOS ASCII text, it is probably because there is a discrepancy over field numbering, for example some entries have missing

fields. But at least you know there is something wrong.

Field length limits create more sneaky problems. Desktop PC databases usually cope with very long entries. But pocket jobs may truncate them, without even an error message. I was just on the point of buying a RexPro card-with-screen when I discovered this damning defect and pulled out.

The Windows CE world is still going through the usual Windows cycle of premature launch and sticking plaster upgrades. I asked Philips what field length the Nino CE manages, but never got an answer. After many ignored requests for information, I finally got 3Com to tell me the good news that the Palm Pilot can manage 250 characters per field.

The Psion Series 5 can cope with a healthy 255 characters per field. PsiWin also comes with a neat option to convert CSV files exported from a desktop database. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work, and Psion is still trying to sort out why not.

The nastiest sting is in the tail. When I did get PSiWin conversion to work, it lost about 10% of the CSV entries. I discovered this by chance when I compared the number of entries before and after transfer. Loss seemed

It catches out many users, who suddenly FORFEIT RELIABLE ACCESS to email or the internet

to be completely arbitrary, unrelated to entry length.

So if you transfer data to any pocket device from a PC, be sure to check the number of entries before and after. Check for truncation of long entries, too. And be sure to do this before using the data synchronisation option provided on modern portables. If the portable has lost data on incoming transfer it may then lose it from the PC when it syncs with the portable.

The trick with PsiWin — needless to say, not in the manual — is to create an empty data file on the Series 5, copy the CSV to the S5 without conversion, and then merge or import the CSV data into the empty database.

At times like these I have to wonder how carefully Psion checks its comms software on real users before releasing it, how much notice the company takes of people like me who have been reporting problems for years and how long Psion will last if 3Com and the CE camp ever really get their acts together.

100131.201@Compuserve.com