Michael Hewitt swims against the tide of Psion 5 lovers and demands a better product.

Alarming disappointments

A couple of months ago, I reached the age at which birthday cakes can start to become a fire hazard. The occasion demanded a major, hi-tech purchase. Accordingly, I bought myself a £400 alarm clock. Not intentionally, though. It's just that, having put it through its paces, I've concluded that the Psion Series 5 isn't much use as anything else.

You're probably wondering how come, if it's so bad, virtually every computer magazine in the land awards it a 'Best Buy' award. I'm wondering that, too. Maybe they've been drinking the same stuff the Series 5 developments team did when they conceived it. There are a number of basic flaws. How are you supposed to use a screen that's virtually illegible, even in the best lighting conditions? And what about proprietary software that isn't compatible with anything but itself? Or a processor that goes through batteries like a sperm whale through krill. (I'll bet shares in Duracell have rocketed over the past 18 months.) Perhaps the guys at Psion were so busy congratulating themselves on having perfected the Series 5's 'innovative' sliding keyboard, they had to farm out the design of everything else to one of the office temps. Well, enough of that; I'll put it down to experience. The question then is: given the Psion Series 5 most definitely isn't the perfect palmtop, what is? Or, as we're talking hypotheticals here since no-one's come up with it yet, what sort of spec should the perfect palmtop have? Difficult. A wallet-sized palmtop computer is, by its very nature, a compromise. In the same way running a lumber mill using bonsai trees is. So long as you only need to produce the occasional box of matches and a couple of Kleenex a week, no problem. Likewise, so long as the palmtop is only required for minimal note taking and entering occasional stuff like address data, it's up to the job. But you wouldn't want to write *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* on one.

The first essential is a legible screen. If you haven't got one of these, forget it. Legible means having a reflective, metallic backing and being around 5x3in. You have to be able to read it, even in dim light. Forget back-lighting: if it's too dark to read, it's too dark to type.

Legible also means not having a metal-oxide coating, as pen-operated palmtops require. The reflection from these is so bad, they act almost as mirrors. Rather than getting any serious work done, you end up admiring yourself in them or squeezing blackheads. The best palmtop screen I've come across is on the Psion 3c.

Next, the keyboard. The 'laptop style' is right out, I'm afraid. Miracles of miniaturisation they may be, but they also tend to clatter, be unresponsive, and stick. The best palmtop keyboard I've ever used was on the Sharp IQ-9000, circa 1994. It consisted of a QWERTY arrangement of little buttons, generously spaced, that gave a reassuring 'Beep!' when depressed. With a good tail-wind, I could achieve between 30 to 40 wpm. So long as I didn't try achieving them for more than about five minutes in one go.

On to the software. Sorry, but this has to be Windows 95/98 compatible. By compatible, I don't mean files get converted on the fly as they're transferred across to the desktop PC. I want to be able to transfer data to any PC, not just my own, without having to use a collection of proprietary comms software and cables.

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Basically, the palmtop should act as the PC's drive D or E. I should be able to transfer and open files seamlessly. Which means having a Windows CE operating system, a cut-down, CE version of programs like Word and Excel, and a universal infra-red interface.

Finally, battery life. I want at least 20 hours from two AA Duracells. Surely that isn't much of a problem, given that the HRT-enhanced Psion 3c, the mx, can achieve it, as can most CE palmtops.

So, have you got that, all you manufacturers out there? At the time of writing, it's early December, 1998, so I won't expect you to have anything ready for me for this Christmas. I shall, however, be more hopeful that you will be better prepared for my next birthday.

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