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* HANDHELDS

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BODY:

IBM has taken another step away from big iron and hardware-centricity towards holistic "business solutions" packaging with this week's debut of the WorkPad, a rebadged version of the popular 3com/US Robotics PalmPilot handheld.

Sharp-eyed sales representatives from Big Blue detected an opportunity when they saw PalmPilots sneaking onto corporate desks through the same well-oiled back door by which PCs entered en masse in the late '80s. Users aren't waiting for MIS reports, they aren't willing to fill in complicated purchase requests (it helps that the \$US399 (\$550) units fall below most capital expenditure limits), and they certainly don't want to wait a month or more until their latest productivity tool is delivered. What do they want? A pocket PC. When do they want it? Now!

Initially offered in the United States only, the IBM WorkPad will be heavily marketed to IT managers and MIS administrators as a "PC companion" for road warriors and corridor cruisers alike, in addition to vertical industry markets.

Those three initials on the plastic will give the PalmPilot the imprimatur desired by corporate buyers and allow it to stride through the front door, on contract and with full technical support. IBM has already given most field technicians full training on the PalmPilot and issued bulky manuals that were definitely not made with mobile computing in mind.

The WorkPad will be built by 3com/USR and will be based on the 1Mb PalmPilot Professional, which harnesses the small-footprint Palm OS 2.0 to a 32-bit 16MHz Motorola RISC chip.

The only difference will be the name and the livery. The WorkPad's matt black case and red power button paint a colour scheme consistent with the company's ThinkPad notebooks - one of the few portables that stand out in a sea of

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look-alikes and an area in which IBM has almost unparalleled brand recognition.

The price tag is identical and the peripherals and software are the same although, somewhat embarrassingly, the Expense Report application burnt into ROM supports only Excel and not IBM's Lotus 1-2-3 spreadsheet. IBM is believed to be having discussions with Palm Computing, creators of the PalmPilot, about programming new WorkPad-specific ROMs for the next version.

Organiser 97 GS, from IBM's Lotus division, already boasts two-way synchronisation with the PalmPilot and before the year's end Lotus will release a free conduit enabling native support for Notes and NotesMail. Worldwide sales of "smart" handhelds - palmtop units with seamless PC connectivity - are expected to reach six million units in 1998, according to a recent analysis from IDC.

These bullish forecasts and the soaring success of the PalmPilot have reinvigorated the handheld market and unleashed a number of similar devices designed around a pocketable form factor, direct-to-screen pen input and an easy "link and sync" data exchange routine for Windows and Macintosh systems.

Texas Instruments' Avigo aims to better the PalmPilot with a larger display, which switches between portrait and landscape view, and an infrared beam. The inbuilt applications include a spreadsheet, calculator, sketch pad and world-time clock.

What's missing is a software development kit, the means by which third-party applications can be developed. This prevents software companies, corporate code-cutters and keen individuals from creating Avigo applets and can only act as a barrier to the device's success.

Worse difficulties may befall the Sharp SE-500 Mobile Organiser. Pundits have applauded the built-in 14.4Kbps modem but are bemused by the lack of any pen input apart from freehand inking: the only way to enter text is to tap each character out on a minute on-screen keyboard.

The PalmPilot's most serious threat will come from - surprise, surprise - Microsoft. Team Bill is beavering away on its own "Pilot-killer". Codenamed Gryphon, the 32-bit pocket-sized device will employ a subset of Windows CE. Among the applications burned into ROM will be an organiser compatible with Microsoft Outlook and a spreadsheet similar in function to CE's Pocket Excel.

The unit will permit pen entry based on the Inkwriter technology obtained through Microsoft's 1996 acquisition of AHA! Software. Infrared beaming and a software modem driving rudimentary Internet software are also rumoured to be in the hand-tooled alpha samples driven by a StrongARM RISC chip. This potent mix is enough to make all but the most dedicated Piloteer pull on a parachute and bail out, but with Gryphon not expected before February 1998, 3com, and now IBM, have enough lead time for the barnstorming PalmPilot to become a fixture in

corporate techno-culture.

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