True portability

USB memory drive, USB memory key, flash memory, I don't care what you call it. The fact is everyone should have one of these little devices, and if you don't you soon will. I will use the term memory key because it best describes the device: unlocks and frees users from the constraints of traditional media, aka the floppy disk.

For anyone who has ever used a laptop the frustration with getting your advice, research, presentation or other files off the laptop usually comes at the worst possible time. Do you find yourself constantly saying "I will email it when I get back to the office" or requesting the files to be burned onto a CD (opps you have no blank CDs). The memory key is now both an affordable and real solution.

In simple terms the memory key is a storage device that plugs into any computer with a USB (universal serial bus) port (unless you computer is really old, you are bound to have one as USB ports are now standard). Once you plug it in, the computer treats it the same way as other disk drives, and you can simply copy files to and from it like any other disk. The memory key does not require external power, it does not require drivers (see below) and is as easy to use as plugging it in.

The memory key is essentially a memory card, you may have come across similar devices used in digital cameras. You can buy a memory key in different sizes with 128MB and 256MB being the most common, but larger sizes are available (over 1GB). For a 128MB or 256MB, the prices range between $100 and $250 depending on brand.
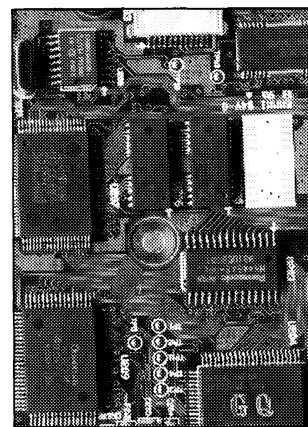
As with everything in technology memory keys are becoming more and more sophisticated, they can now be used to play MP3 music files, run applications, and there are keys that are waterproof and others that allow you to swap files without even using a computer. However, the one thing that they do and do extremely well is store data that would require a brief case of floppy disks, while being portable and compatible with any computer.

But the best thing is that it works and you don't need to be a technocrat to make it work. By the way, my favourite is the Sony Microvault - it just looks good!

Things to know before buying your memory key

* USB ports have been improved so there are now two types: USB 1.1 and USB 2.0. The difference is essentially speed, USB 2.0 is significantly faster. USB 2.0 is recommended and also works with the older USB 1.1 ports (it just operates at the lower speed).

* The no driver comment above essentially means that you can plug your memory key into computers running Windows XP, Windows 2000 and some versions of Windows 98 and it just works. However, you can get drivers for other systems. You should consider what operating system you use at home, at work, what your clients and others you interact with use. However, just using it between home and work will still provide great benefits.

* Security. If you are using your memory key for confidential or sensitive information, make sure you get a key with encryption. This feature enables you to either completely "lock" your key, or partition your key so that it is part locked and part open. ①