

THE PALMPILOT

Background and Information

The PalmPilot was an early, successful example of a handheld, mobile computing device in the 1990s. Also known as a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant).

It allowed people to keep track of their appointments and contacts and take notes using handwriting recognition software.

The PalmPilot was carefully designed to meet user needs—if it did not, it would not have been all that useful or popular. Other handhelds had tried and failed on the market already.

It was designed to connect easily with a user's home computer—most users of PalmPilots also had desktop computers that they did much of their work on. Palm was successful as an accessory to the PC, not as its replacement.

People interacted with the PalmPilot using a stylus, a pen they could use to write and select features. No keyboard or touchscreen, just the pen.

During the prototyping process, engineers thought through how people would use it, how many steps would it take to get to different features, was it easy to use for notetaking, etc. Several prototypes were created:

- Wooden prototype: Used by Jeff Hawkins, who pretended to take notes in meetings.
- "Tethered prototype": Let engineers develop software for the PalmPilot before the production units were available.
- Keyboard-based model: Unsure if the stylus would be popular, PalmPilot engineers tested this version as well.

The PalmPilot also had handwriting recognition software. To improve accuracy, Palm engineers created a simplified alphabet called Graffiti that users had to learn. The new alphabet frustrated some users, but really caught on for others.