

The Road Warrior Option

We're all out there traveling through airports, Internet cafes, hotel lobbies and conference centers. If that wasn't difficult enough, we are expected to 'stay in touch', get some work done – and most notably – do it securely.

Securely. Our various companies have differing policies and approaches to mobile security; from none at all (ugh!) to super-crypto-biometric compliance.

Conceptually, at first blush, security could take first seat in mobile computing. However, I can equally argue that another theme should take priority: What does your company really expect for you to do while on the road?

Sure, we could easily say, "everything," but let's parse that for a moment of realism. In an uber-budget-conscious era, especially if you are in need of a mobile upgrade, does your next computer doesn't need to be a super whiz-bang performer?

Let's consider just what we use our personal and business computers for – and what we can do to minimize our security risk:

1. Surfing the Net. From Amazon to BBC to eBay we all want fast, immediate access to the internet. Most businesses offer remote corporate network access, and the diligent ones insist that a VPN, virtual private network, be employed to secure the connection with strong encryption and key management. Security-minded users will smartly install a personal VPN and service (~\$20-\$30 per year) for their banking, trading and other private on-line activities.
2. We all e-mail friends, family and communicate for personal as well as for business needs. Web mail is often frowned upon by the Enterprise, but with a Blackberry, often the computer itself does not even need an e-mail client. Often, the mobile device will securely connect to the corporate mail server over a VPN, but for personal use, either with a client or with web mail, a personal VPN is certainly recommended.
3. Even on our business machines many of us want to be able to play music, watch movies and look at family photos. With the proliferation of legal video services like www.Hulu.Com, www.SurfTheChannel.Com, and www.NetFlix.Com, users have immediate access to almost limitless amounts of previously broadcast television shows and movies. The smart thing to do is to add a "Personal" user account on the mobile device to isolate personal and business resources.
4. Some number of not-quite road warriors need to write the occasional memo, review a spreadsheet or presentation while waiting for a delayed flight.

These four needs satisfy a large number of travelers who would conventionally purchase an expensive, heavy and overburdened laptop computer.

There is an alternative: The Netbook.

Netbooks are small laptops and offer everything mentioned above and a lot more! Since we are security conscious and want you to be, too, one of the big advantages of Netbooks is that they do not require a lot of security maintenance.

New Netbooks are appearing every month and it is estimated that more than 20 million will be sold in 2009, representing more than 12% of the laptop market. Consider your options:

- Netbooks generally do not use Windows or Mac OS X. Most use a form of Linux. The most recent [Ubuntu](http://www.ubuntu.com) version (www.ubuntu.com) is an often-mentioned favorite. If the word Linux scares you, think again. It will look and feel like Windows, but like a Mac, will be far less susceptible to viruses and hostile software. You will use your mouse on a GUI (Graphical User Interface) with pretty pictures and icons and can go to work right away.
- Many include a fully operational version of Open Office (or similar: www.OpenOffice.Org) that reads and writes files that are compatible with Microsoft Office files (Word, Excel and PowerPoint).
- Netbooks often include picture and file organization and a wide range of useful utility software just like 'real' computers.
- Most have built-in wireless (WiFi), generally the slower but adequate 'G' version of about 54 megabits per second, and are compatible with whatever wireless system you already have.
- Many have built-in web cams so you can video chat with friends and family from Manila to London, to Singapore to Toronto and everywhere in between.
- USB and other standard interfaces let you grow your Netbook with additional external hard drives and large monitors.

Sounds too good to be true? There has to be a downside? There are many, some of which may matter to you or not.

- The hard drive is smaller than you might be used to. For large storage requirements, you will need an on-line data storage service or external hard drive.
- The screen is small. For those of us with glasses and older eyes, an older, unused external monitor will help out a lot.
- Netbooks are not meant for video editing, scientific calculations or massive spreadsheets. For those applications, a proper laptop or desktop with enough storage, RAM and power is still the right choice.

Netbooks are not for everyone, but they do provide a very reasonable alternative for general-purpose computer work. Security wise, consider the following, even though they generally run Linux.

1. Still use a personal firewall to keep your files isolated from any other computers on your home network or from other internet users.

2. Always use a VPN for connecting to the office and for personal on-line financial transactions.
3. According to Symantec, there are 65 Linux viruses (compared to almost 1,000,000 for Windows). Most Linux users don't bother, but it's really smart to stay alert, aware and in practice. Pick one of the many A/V products out there and use it as regularly as you would on your Windows machine.
4. All other security rules are the same; protect your passwords, set up multiple user accounts, turn off sharing as much as is reasonable; don't open unknown attachments; avoid hostile web sites... and above all, use common sense.

Oh yeah; we almost forgot.

Netbooks are appearing daily... even showing up in Wal-Mart, Dell and other discount stores for as little as US\$200. Of course, you may find your best deals by searching the internet.

So, before making that next computer purchase... consider, research, and ask the right questions: do you really need to spend \$1,000 - \$2,000 for a new computer... or will your needs be well met (securely!) for a whole lot less. Tell us about your experiences and we'll pass it on.

Netbook Linux Resources

1. www.Download.Com and search for hundreds of security and useful utilities.
2. <http://www.yolinux.com/TUTORIALS/LinuxSecurityTools.html> includes both hacking and defensive security tools. Please only download from home.
3. Search: Linux firewall; Linux antivirus; Linux Security. Feel free to add the word "free" into your searches, too.