Life in the Fax Lane

The motto for tomorrow's executive? Have office, will travel.

In the fast lanes of modern business—those once-orderly, now-frenzied avenues of trade—hard-driving executives are forever trying to out-motor the competition, to speed ahead and stake out a little open asphalt on the road to upward mobility.

Gone are the days when the engines of American commerce ran on a simple chassis of paper and ink, lubricated by the occasional dry martini. Deals once concocted over drinks at the club are increasingly conducted by phone, fax and modem.

New gadgetry hits the market at a dizzying rate: telephones that fit in your pocket, fax machines for your dashboard, solar-powered bicycle-mounted laptop computers—a cornucopia of digital devices and doodads, with applications ranging from the nearly revolutionary to the merely novel.

It's all terribly impressive, of course. But as an already-glutted market swells
with the latest businessware, would-be buyers may wonder just how far down the road these glamorous gadgets will really take them, and in what direction: on a shortcut to state-of-the-art sophistication or down a blind alley to early obsolescence?

This is not to say that a lot of these new machines aren't perfectly useful. No doubt there will be plenty of conscientious, hard-working executives putting all their glitzy gizmos to legitimate uses. But let's face it: Plenty are the products bought in the name of professional performance that turn out to be little more than status trinkets.

Of course, for the well-placed professional with a healthy corporate expense account (or a working knowledge of the business deductions allowed by the IRS), questions of practical utility may weigh a little less heavily on the fiscal conscience. But those with limited resources would do well to proceed with caution down the pricey, sometimes primrose pathways to progress.

In the not-so-distant future, well-equipped executives could be leading lives of unprecedented efficiency and ease . . . or so the gadget-mongers would have us believe. To hear the marketers tell it, the world of tomorrow is just a phone call and credit-card order away.

Here's a day in the life of the hipster who can't resist the latest in gizmos. You get up, you shower, and you're ready for the usual morning commute. That dreary 8 a.m. trek through the humorless, half-awake mass of gridlocked humanity is no longer quite the waste of time it used to be. While the office is still a traffic jam away, just switch on the mobile phone, dial up your voice-mail messages, click on the mobile laptop, punch up your E-mail via mobile modem ... and you're all tuned in and ready to do business.

By the time you make it to work, you're ahead on the day. You can make that first appointment, no sweat. You're sure Jones will have a lot to say, interesting stuff to be sure, but you don't want to blow the rest of the day. Nor do you want to offend Jones by checking your watch or having the little alarm go off. Here's the solution. Panasonic's Personal Time Manager gives you an easy, inconspicuous out.

Simply set the timer as you would with any other alarm clock; when the appointed time comes around, the device emits a silent vibrating pulse that only you can feel. You've still got to make your excuses, but Jones is out of there in plenty of time.

Just in time, in fact, so that you can make a few pressing phone calls before your next appointment. For dialing on the run, here's the latest in extravagant executive accessories: the remote auto-dialer. Yes, if you're just too busy to reach out and touch those buttons, or if you just feel like being on the other side of the room from your phone, you can dial from a leisurely distance using the little keypad on this handheld device.

Once your call's gone through (whether by speaker phone, cordless extension or hands-off wireless head-set phone), and you're all wrapped up in this wiry web of high technology, you may start to feel pangs of Big Brotherly paranoia. If you're important enough—or self-important enough—to suppose that "someone else" might be listening in on your conversation, then here's a product to pacify that feeling of persecution. The Tap Detector V alerts you to the presence of would-be telephone eavesdroppers, flashing a red warning light whenever faint disturbances in the telephone signal suggest that someone else might be tapping the line.

So. What was that other thing you needed to do today? Was it that dentist's appointment? Can't remember? Don't strain yourself. Why not let a computer do the remembering for you? Any number of digital diaries now on the market can prompt your feeble mind as to the day's agenda, as well as maintain up-to-date lists of addresses, phone numbers and events. These auto-memo gizmos can do just about anything you can do with a pencil and notebook—and for just $139 more. Well, almost everything ... you'll have to find your own doodling paper.

Until now, that is. Just coming down the development chute from Sony are the first portable "scratch-pad" computers, sophisticated light-pen electro-Etch-A-Sketch devices that can actually read your handwriting (provided it's vaguely legible) and translate it into computer-ready prose. This would seem tailor-made for the tradition-bound, computer-hostile executive. Now you can just scribble your thoughts to enter them into a computer. Finally, machinery sophisticated enough to accommodate even backward bigwigs and high-level loafers.

You've made your calls, done your meetings, finished your busywork . . . and the day is done.

Time to wind down with an after-work workout: maybe a session on the stair-climber at the company gym, or maybe the cycle-machine, or the Soloflex. Or maybe you'd rather just wind out with a full-speed fling down the highway, courtesy of your new wafer-thin microradar detector. Whatever your preferred mode of stress-decompression, there's a machine out there for you.

—Alexander Wright
force, of course, is the computer. Programmers, engineers, consultants and anyone working at a terminal can communicate to work via modem these days—if their employers will let them.

Many employers remain reluctant to warrant their employees such license, figuring that a worker left unsupervised is bound to slack off or lose touch with his or her co-workers. But many of those who do work at home, once presented with the prospect of having their performance judged more on merit than on the day-to-day politics of the workplace, find no problem staying motivated. Some studies have suggested that productivity actually increases among stay-at-home workers, due to the elimination of commuting time and office distractions.

The road to modernizing the workplace branches off in several directions. For most workers, new technologies will ease office-to-office communications. Others will find themselves mobilized right back to their homes. But the professionals likely to be riding the crest of the wave will be the workers taking to the open road.

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Come with us, then, on a quick reconnaissance trip and you’ll soon understand why we’ve been moved to draw all these motoring analogies. If you’re going to travel the highway to success, you’ll need a lot more than that old cellular phone. Where this route will take us exactly is anyone’s guess, but one thing’s for sure: The future lies along the open road.

We’ll start our trip with a visit to Boston’s Plymouth Rock Assurance Corporation. A small insurance company founded in 1983 by former Dukakis administration insurance commissioner James M. Stone, Plymouth Rock’s business has exploded from $3 million in its first year to $90 million in 1989.

The company expects to build on that success—and surge ahead of the competition—with its Crashbusters program, an on-call claims-adjustment program that rides on state-of-the-art mobile office technology. The heart of the program is three vans loaded with equipment that helps an adjustor investigate an auto-accident claim and get a quick—sometimes on the spot—settlement for the claimant.

The whole thing works like this: If you get into an accident, you get word to Plymouth Rock and they send out a van to see your damaged car.

Philip Cataldo, Plymouth Rock’s claims manager, let us peer into one of the Crashbusters. It looks like something Arnold Schwarzenegger would be proud to steer. There are computer monitors, multiple phone lines, a video camera and a plush swivel chair. Everything’s either nailed down or safely stowed away in one of the numerous console cabinets.

The gadgetry includes a battery-powered laptop computer loaded with software that’s custom-designed for calculating damages, repairs and replacement parts costs. Then there’s the Canon still-image video camera that transmits pictures directly into a full-sized PC, which can then transmit the...
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COMPUTERS ...

Computers, for one thing, are coming on the market in an array of styles and applications. According to some estimates, mobile data transmissions may account for as much as ten percent of all cellular phone use within a few years. "Mobile computers are going to be coming on in a big way," says John Pemberton, author of a mobile-technology report for Gartner Group, a high-tech consulting company. "You won't see them coming until all of a sudden boom—they'll be everywhere."

Mobile PCs promise to streamline things for workers on the go. Salespeople, delivery drivers and repair crews, to name a few, will be able to finish more of their work on the road. This will mean support staff back at the office can spend less time as data-entry clerks.

Several prescient computer makers are already weighing in with compact computers made especially for mobile use. Zebryk Engineering, of Southbridge, is among the first outfits in the nation to develop a portable computer specifically for use in automobiles.

Standard equipment in a prototype Cadillac limousine includes a fax, a VCR, two cellular phones and a paper shredder.

Partners Jay Zebryk and Steve Davis created the computer from scratch, designing shock-resistant innards and a full-sized, high-resolution screen with a photo-sensitive polarizer panel to facilitate daylight viewing. Zebryk is still trying out the product with local firms that have agreed to conduct test drives.

Also on the market are several ultra-compact, Palm-sized computers.

These things have been around for a few years now. They have one big drawback: those tiny keyboards. For anyone with fingers larger than pencil-tip erasers, the tiny keys make for slow and sloppy typing.

The solution: eliminate the keyboard altogether. The latest generation of microcomputers sidesteps the keyboard problem by using alternative means of interfacing.

From a Japanese electronics manufacturer comes Murata LINKS, a hand-

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far end of the status spectrum lies a vast assortment of out-of-sight gadgets with incredible price tags and sometimes implausible purposes.

Every day, engineers are hard at work dreaming up new ways to utilize our time while our hands are devoted to the mundane task of driving. The more we can do while driving—and the fewer hands we can do it with—the more gadgets they can hope to sell us.

The ideal mobile-office machines require no hands at all, of course. A new generation of voice-activated cellular speaker-phones (like GTE's Silver Series 300) promise a safer and more efficient mode of roadwork—for a price. At around $1400, the voice-activated phones cost three to four times as much as most manual models.

Another high-priced hands-off option comes from Chrysler, which teamed up a few years ago with OKI Telecom of Atlanta to develop the car phone mounted on a sun visor. It's a compact, out-of-the-way alternative to hump-mounted phones. Chrysler plans to offer the phones as a dealer option only in its top-of-the-line sedans, but similar phones are now sold in stores.

Currently under development at Mazda is the MPV Executive, a fully-equipped mobile office that costs about $28,000. Standard equipment includes a cellular telephone, fax machine and laptop computer. Then there are the cozy creature comforts: TV, VCR, CD player, video camera, foldaway desk, full leather upholstery and—that sure sign of executive ascendency—a bar.

For sheer capitalistic excess, General Motors' new prototype-model Cadillac limousine wins by a mile. Standard equipment includes a fax machine, remote-control TV, VCR, two cellular phones, and a mobile paper shredder. If only Oliver North could have sunk his hard-earned cash into one of these sweethearts, he might be on the high road through Honduras by now.

There's no telling whether these mobile monstrosities will catch on in the open market—with price tags projected into the $80,000 range, any private citizen who can actually afford one of these things could probably just as well spring for an early retirement. But for the conspicuous consumer with money to burn—well, it doesn't get much more conspicuous than this.

In the land of disposable income even those of fewer means can do away with their dollars in style. For would-be bigwigs on a limited budget, here's the latest in affordable status accessories—the faux car phone. For about $50, you can have a life-size look-alike phony car phone installed in your console. Impress friends and annoy fellow drivers . . . all at a fraction of the usual cost.