Palm Pilot – More Than A PDA

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A Great Gift

On my recent birthday, one of those big ones with a 0 at the end, my wife Ruth, knowing that I am a gadget lover, gave me a Palm Pilot IIIxe as a gift. She bought it locally and told me that if I do not appreciate the gift I could return it. Well, on one hand I dislike the "to-do" lists for which the Palm Pilot is famous - my current "organizer" consists of a "Week At-A-Glance" pocket calendar, which I replace every year. On the other hand I was fascinated by the clever design and multitude of software available for Palm operating system. Then Ruth suggested to hook the Pilot to the Internet to read and receive email. This sounded like fun and I started doing some research. I found that most Pilot owners use it exclusively as an organizer. Those with deep pockets, or with their employer ready to pick up the tab, use a wireless modem or a cable to connect the Pilot to their cellular phone. The wireless services are quite expensive, typically $30-$50 per month, a special cable to connect the Pilot to a cellular phone costs over $90 and Sprint charges 39 cents/minute for data calls. I decided that there has to be a better and less expensive way to connect to the Internet, namely with an external modem and a phone line.

Setting Up my Pilot as a Terminal and a Mail Client

After studying the Pilot manual (it comes as a book not on a CD!) I found that the Pilot has a built-in Internet capable TCP/IP dialer. It also has a Mail program for saving and composing emails. All I needed then was to install on my Palm a mail client, something like Eudora, but for the Pilot. I did more research on Usenet, where there are two very active news groups dedicated to pocket organizers:

alt.comp.sys.palmtops.pilot,

and

comp.sys.palmtops

Searching through these news groups I found a mention of a mail client program called ProxiMail. It is freeware and I downloaded it from http://www.proxinet.com/. To complete my hardware requirements I still needed an external modem and a null modem.

You can buy from 3Com a battery operated external 33.6 modem for $169, but I found in my basement a small USR Sportster 33.6 external modem discarded a year ago, and a null modem plug bought at a computer show a couple of years ago for under $5.

My hardware setup is now the Pilot in its cradle, the DB9 serial plug from the cradle connected to a DB9/DB25 adapter, which in turn is plugged into a null modem. The null modem plugs into my USR external modem. Finally a telephone cable connects the external modem to the phone jack on the wall.

Configuring the Pilot

For the Pilot software to operate properly I still had to configure Connection and Network in the built-in Prefs and Mail programs and also configure the ProxiMail program. I set up a new Connection calling it "Monmouth Internet" (my ISP), set the Connection Method as "Serial to Modem", Dialing as "Touch Tone", Volume as "Low", Speed as "115,200 bps", Flow Ctl as "Automatic", Init String as "AT&F&B1" (restore factory configuration, set fixed DTE speed). Though this string is essential for my USR Sportster modem, you may need a different one for your modem. The initialization string has to compensate for the lack of Data Terminal Ready (DTR) signal from the Pilot. Though the basic AT commands are the same for all modems, the extended AT commands starting with "&" vary from modem to modem. Check the modem manual. In the Network section I set up a new Service "Monmouth", filled out the User Name and Password, selected as Connection "Monmouth Internet" and gave it the local phone number to dial. I set Connection type to "PPP", Idle timeout to "1 Minute", I also check marked "Query DNS" and "Automatic IP Address." Though my modem would now dial and connect to my ISP, it still would not perform user/password authentication - a possible bug in the Pilot software. I therefore used a login script with "Wait For", "Send CR" and "Send" commands selected from the Pilot menu. This worked! Finally ProxiMail required entering SMTP and POP preferences. The SMTP server for outgoing mail for me is "smtp.monmouth.com", the POP server for incoming mail is "mail.monmouth.com". I also had to enter my email address and name, Username and Password. There were several more options to select - Paste extra headers "No", Truncate messages "5 KB", Delete from server "No", Save "All messages" and Query for each message "No". With this software and hardware setup I now tap with the stylus the ProxiMail icon on my Pilot menu and then tap "Get Mail", "Send Mail" or "Both". The Pilot through the external modem automatically dials, connects to my ISP, authenticates user name and password, and a minute later all my incoming email was in my Pilot Inbox folder, all outgoing email, previously composed and saved in the Outbox folder, was on its way to Internet recipients. By this time my desktop computer just booted!

As there are minor differences between various releases of the Palm OS, my "how to do it" for release 3.5.0 may not apply exactly to your organizer and you may have to modify it. However, the hardware setup should be the same as mine. I have now an inexpensive way to "stay in touch" while on vacation. The only question is - do I want it?

Other Palm Applications

Over the next year I found many more applications for my Palm Pilot which did not fall into the "organizer" categories. They are described in the following presentation:

(Go To The Power Point Slide Presentation)