

# Should you buy a Netbook?

by Ben Eggenberger, GIRESD Technology Manager

The holidays are quickly approaching and I can't tell you how many people have asked me for advice on that very question over the last couple of months. You've probably seen these advertised a lot lately – maybe you even know somebody who has one. And if you're in the market for a new computer, and have seen the great prices on these new products, you may have considered buying one yourself. Here's what you should know first!

**Netbooks are great** – as long as you know what you're buying. First and foremost, you probably shouldn't expect a netbook to be a perfect replacement for your home desktop computer – or even a replacement for a more traditional notebook/laptop. Netbooks are a niche product -- for the most part, they're designed to compliment your main computer, not replace it. Here's a list of some of the compromises you make when you buy a netbook and their implications:

**1. Netbooks do not** include optical drives (CD/DVD drives). This means you'd better be fairly computer savvy (or at least have a close friend or relative who is) if you want to get along with one. When you want to install a new application, for instance, you're going to have to be a little creative. We're all used to going to the store and buying software on a CD or DVD. You can still do that, but then you'll need to figure out how to get that CD connected to your netbook. This can be done easily by attaching an external CD drive to the netbook's USB port. Of course, most people don't have an external CD drive! If you're really astute, you can use your desktop computer to convert the CD to an ISO file. You can then move the ISO to a thumb drive (aka flash drive, USB key, jump drive, etc.) and use that to install your new software on the netbook. Sounds like a lot of trouble, doesn't it? My preferred method of installing software is for you to join us here in the new millennium and start buying your software online. Did you know you can buy and download almost any software package these days? Even the new operating system, Windows 7, is available as a download! Downloading your software directly to the netbook obviates the need for an optical drive.

**2. Netbooks do not** include optical drives (CD/DVD drives). Wait a minute; didn't we already cover this one?!?! Yes, but there's another aspect to not having an optical drive – you can't pop a DVD in for the kids to watch on that next long car trip! Never fear – it is possible (and easy) to get your movies onto the hard drive of the netbook once you've done a little research and made a small investment in some necessary software. Once you have, you'll find that your netbook is a great portable movie-watching device!

**3. Netbooks are designed** to be CHEAP. That means you won't have access to the fastest processors, you won't be able to install nearly as much RAM (memory), and you won't be able to buy them with huge hard drives. All that adds up to having a significantly slower computing experience than a new laptop or desktop would provide, and you won't have as much room for your music, photo, and movie collections. I wouldn't call this a deal breaker. Performance is going to be fine for the majority of what you're going to want to do with your netbook. Your main media collections will probably be stored on another computer somewhere anyway, you'll just keep enough on the netbook to meet your immediate needs.

**4. Screens (obviously) are** going to be much smaller than what you're used to. If you're considering buying one of these as a gift for your elderly parents, you may want to consider this. How's their eyesight?

**5. Another obvious one** - the keyboard will be somewhat smaller than what's found on a full size laptop. I find that I'm still able to type pretty well on them, but I wouldn't want to have any marathon typing sessions on one, and I don't expect to be able to type quite as proficiently as I usually do.



**Ok, now for the list of positives:**

1. They're small.
2. They're cheap.

**Oh, you want me to elaborate? Ok!**

1. **They're small.** So small, my wife can put hers in her purse. She has a traditional laptop, but with all the other stuff she has to carry to and from school, we found she wasn't using the laptop nearly as much as she'd have liked. Now that she has the netbook, size and weight are no longer concerns.
2. **They're cheap.** Prices range from free with a new DSL account, to around \$300 (I'd call this the sweet spot) on up to about \$500. You can actually pay a lot more for one if you want, but I personally don't know many people with so much disposable income they want to spend \$1500 on a netbook that's less capable than a \$600 laptop! But hey, it takes all kinds!

**Ok, back to our question** - should you buy a netbook? The very best way to make that decision is to become good friends with someone who already owns a netbook. Refer to the points above and then pick their brain on the ones that concern you the most. If at all possible, borrow a netbook for a couple hours or days and see if it's right for you. Good luck and happy computing!