

Would a PDA Help You Get Organized in 2005? **Frank Buck, Ed.D.**

Your world moves fast and you feel you have more to do than you can possibly do. With papers to grade, parents to call, and demands on your time that seem to grow each year, the feeling of being overwhelmed is common to even veteran teachers. Is a PDA the answer to getting organized and staying on top of it all? The truth is that this little tool has the potential to provide a huge boost in productivity. The key is having a well-planned strategy for how and where you store information so that you will see your commitments at the appropriate time and be able to retrieve information easily.

Unfortunately, very little has been written that gets to the “nuts and bolts” level you and I need in order to put together a total system. Even less has been written from the point of view of the classroom teacher. With a PDA, you can free yourself from the assorted legal pads, note pads, scraps of paper, and oceans of sticky notes that clutter your desk. More importantly, you can relieve a great deal of unneeded stress by letting your system do your remembering for you.

In this article, I will share with you the process I recommend you try to decide if a PDA is right for you. Secondly, we will fast forward to show you how the handheld device will fit into a teacher’s day. Finally, I will give you several excellent sources that will help you refine your system should you decide the PDA is the route you wish to go.

Try It Out

Any office superstore will display various models of PDAs. Take the opportunity the experiment with them in the store. You will, however, need one valuable piece of information in order for your adventure to be successful. You must be familiar with “Graffiti,” the method of forming letters. For example, if you were to attempt to write a capital “A” with the normal three strokes, the result will be something far different from the desired result. Newer models use “Graffiti 2.” Before you go to your local office superstore, print a copy of the graffiti alphabet to take with you.

Explore the Palm Desktop

The Palm Desktop is a software package which will you install on your computer. You download it for and begin using it today. The download is fully functional and will allow you to experiment with keeping a calendar, address book, or to-do list. You even have the ability to print your work.

Actually, most of your data entry will be done on the Palm Desktop, simply because typing with 10 fingers is faster than the Grafitti entry on the handheld for just about all of us. With a touch of the button, you will “synchronize” the Palm Desktop with the Palm handheld. Every new entry on the Palm Desktop will be duplicated on the handheld, and every change made on the handheld will be duplicated on the Palm Desktop. Those who use Outlook have the option of synchronizing the Palm handheld with Outlook instead of the Palm Desktop. Personally, I prefer using Outlook because it incorporates e-mail, my calendar, all of my tasks, contacts, and reference material in one place.

Examine How Much Information Arrives Digitally

How many e-mails do you get that include directions on how to get somewhere, agendas for meetings, confirmations of online orders, requests from others? How much information do you get off the internet? You could print all of that stuff and add to the amount of paper already cluttering your work area. Instead, you could have a system which allows what *comes* to you digitally to *stay* digital.

Life with A PDA

Here are just a few of the examples from my daily routine which illustrate how I manage information in a digital world:

1. I have an appointment in another city, and enter the appointment in Outlook. I go to MapQuest to get the driving directions. Rather than hit "print," I highlight the directions, hit copy (<Control-C>), double-click on my appointment, and paste (<Control-V>) the directions in the note section of the appointment. The next time I synchronize with my PDA, those directions appear in a little note attached to my appointment. When I get in the car, one tap on that note icon brings the whole set of directions to the PDA's screen.
2. I receive an e-mail which announces a meeting and includes that meeting's agenda. I click and drag the e-mail to the "Calendar" icon on Outlook and the e-mail turns into an appointment. I set the date and time and click "Save." After synchronizing with the PDA, not only do I have the appointment on the calendar, but a note attached to that appointment included the full text of the original e-mail message, including the agenda.
3. While a pencil and paper address book lets me keep a name, address, and phone number, the PDA lets me keep far more. Need to remember Uncle Ned's clothing sizes? Look him up in your contacts list and attach a note. The note is a perfect place to capture those sizes. Need to remember the names of your colleagues' children (and maybe even their birthdays)? Pull up a colleague in your contacts list and add in an attached note add the information about the kids. Never can remember your Xerox machine serial number when you call for service? Go to "Xerox" in your contacts list and put that serial number in an attached note.
4. I never have to rewrite a to-do list. Whatever does not get done today simply stays on the list for tomorrow. Tasks that are completed disappear with one touch. In additions, tasks are easy to organize by *category*.
 - When I pick up the telephone, I click on the category called "Calls" and I immediately see a list of every phone call on every open project.
 - Another category called "Errands" holds a list of every stop I need to make when I am "out and about."
 - My "Office" category keeps me abreast on every task I can accomplish in that location. A classroom teacher might want to have a category called "Classroom" instead. When you have discretionary time while students are completing seatwork, during your planning time, before school, or after school, this list will show you all of the tasks you could complete at that place and time.

- When I leave the office, the “Building” category tells me everything needing my attention somewhere in the school building. The classroom teacher will find this a valuable list when leaving the classroom during the planning period or during that time before and after school.
 - As one might guess, the “Home” category houses all the tasks that need to be performed when I get home.
 - Those tasks I have handed off to someone to complete are tracked in the “Delegated” category.
5. Handling multiple projects has never been easier. For a complete explanation of how I keep many balls in the air at once, visit FrankBuck.org.
 6. In the event of a crisis at our school, how valuable would it be for me to have in my coat pocket the name of every student in my school along with the names of his or her parents, addresses, and phone number? Every bit of that information is stored in a little program called “Documents to Go” right on my PDA.
 7. A section called “Notes” provides the perfect place for any type of reference material.
 - A note called “Unifying Principles” houses the guiding principles for my life.
 - A note called “Numbers” lists all of the passwords, codes, and account numbers I have to supply for any situation.
 - For each of the workshops I conduct, I have a note containing an outline for that workshop.
 - My dogs each have their own Note so that I can record weigh changes over time, notes from checkups, and nutritional information about their foods.
 - You might even have a favorite poem you want to carry with you at all times. Notes is the place to put it. If that poem resides somewhere on the internet, there is not need to even key it. Simply copy the text from the web and paste it in a note.
 8. The search function of the PDA puts any information at my fingertips in seconds.
 9. Because the PDA has a calculator built in, I have a calculator everywhere I go.
 10. Additional programs downloaded free from the internet give me the complete text of the Bible (fully searchable by keyword), a chemical table telling me everything I would ever want to know about any of the elements, and a conversion program that takes all the math out of changing miles to meters, Fahrenheit to Celsius, or acres to square miles. Not bad for something that fits in my coat pocket!

For Further Growth

If you are interested in making a move in the direction of organizing your life with a PDA, or if you are already using a PDA, there are three sources I would like to recommend in terms of continuous growth:

- Visit David Allen’s website at www.davidco.com David’s philosophy on time management and organization, a model he calls “Getting Things Done” works extremely well with a PDA. His site includes an excellent discussion board where you can ask questions and exchange ideas with others.
- Join the GtD Palm Group. This Yahoo group discusses nuts and bolts issues getting things done using a PDA. Check out my blog at FrankBuck.org.blog.

I began this blog as a place to post ideas I present at time management workshops I conduct for teachers and principals.

Can a PDA get you organized in 2005? I hope this article helps you make a thoughtful decision.

Frank Buck is principal in Graham School and also serves as curriculum coordinator and professional development coordinator for the five elementary schools in the Talladega (Alabama) School System. In his spare time, Dr. Buck enjoys conducting workshops on various aspects of time management and organization. He can be contacted at Frank@FrankBuck.org.