

Working gifts that could save your bacon; Wireless battery chargers, secure USB keys lack glitz But a giver's star will rise when they're needed

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Drop me into any electronics store and I light up - never more than during the holiday season, when retailers roll out tempting new products and the tricked-up versions of previous best-sellers. Our house is littered with past temptations the audio booster that promised to turn my PC into a deluxe stereo, the cable adapter that was to turn the same PC into a VCR, the video editing suite that was going to turn me into the next Quentin Tarantino.

What separates the technological wheat from the chaff? Real productivity. The gadgets that get the most use are those that let us work better and more effectively, and solve real problems.

Some of this year's gadgets combine a gee whiz factor with utility and innovation. Fingerprint recognition lets people protect their hardware and - even more important their data - by using tiny fingerprint scanners as an alternative to password authentication. Bluetooth is a system for creating wireless connections between phones, computers, PDAs and other electronics. It has been around for years but only now becoming a standard part of consumer-grade products.

How do you know which of these technologies will suit the people on your shopping list? I've organized my picks to fit the common characters in today's wired workplaces.

The Office Nomad The friend who claims to work from home, but is always at the diner. The colleague who says he can't think without a latte, and holds meetings at the Second Cup.

The gift A subscription to a wi-fi hotspot network. Wi-Fi providers like Telus Mobility and Fatport offer wireless access to the Internet at cafes, restaurants and other public places; anyone with a Wi-Fi-enabled laptop and a favourite coffee shop can use the networks to simultaneously surf and sip.

Telus Mobility offers airtime by the hour, day, week or month; \$40 buys a month of airtime that can be used at most locations of Timothy's World Coffee and several other cafes, hotels and conference centres. Accounts can be set up and prepaid at any hotspot location; see www.telusmobility.com for a list of locations

Fatport offers airtime by the hour, day, month or year; \$34.95 buys a month of airtime that can be used at Croissant Tree cafes, among other locations; \$299.95 buys a one-year subscription. Airtime can be purchased online at www.fatport.com; prepaid cards are available from authorized dealers, listed on the Fatport Web site.

The stocking stuffer After eight cups of coffee, your friend may be tempted to leave his computer unattended during a bathroom break. Kensington's MicroSaver security cable is long enough to loop through the back of a cafe chair - don't use the table leg! - and locks into the security slot that is standard on most laptop computers.

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The Kensington laptop lock retails for \$59.99 at computer and office supply stores, and online at www.buykensington.ca.

The Secret Agent She's the only person in the office who has separate passwords for her computer, e-mail, voicemail, and bank account - and none of them includes her birthday or her dog's name. No wonder it takes her an hour to get up and running every day.

The gift Fujitsu's P7010 LifeBook is part of a new generation of notebook computers that incorporate fingerprint scanning technology. By setting up a user identity and associated fingerprint, a paranoid worker can replace a repertoire of passwords with a single finger scan. And if she's still worried about the data lying around her desktop, the LifeBook is small enough to carry in her purse.

The unit lists for \$2,719 at www.fujitsu.ca and in stores.

The stocking stuffer A removable flash drive can add fingerprint authentication to any PC - and provides an easy way of moving data between home and office machines. Sony's 128 MB Biometric Micro Vault uses fingerprint access to encrypt files or folders on the drive or an associated host computer; it can also store passwords for up to 200 Web sites, all accessed with a single finger scan.

The Sony USM128C MicroVault lists for \$159.99 at www.sonystyle.ca and in stores.

The Cell Obsessive Something is different about your neighbour this week - is it a new haircut? No, you just don't recognize him when he hasn't got a cellphone pressed against his ear. The phones get smaller and smaller while his airtime bill gets bigger and bigger.

The gift A Bluetooth headset lets him keep that cellphone in its case while he keeps his eyes on the road. Motorola's HS810 headset sits over the ear, connects wirelessly with Bluetooth-enabled cellphones, and has enough battery life to last for 5 hours of talk and 100 hours of standby. If the airtime bill is prohibitive, the headset can be used for Web-based chat and voice-over-IP phone calls on selected Bluetooth-enabled computers.

Motorola HS810 retails for \$149.95; a \$25 rebate is available through www.motorola.ca for purchases made before December 31, 2004.

The stocking stuffer Charge2Go is a tiny cellphone charger that runs on AA batteries. The Motorola model can be used to recharge that Bluetooth headset, too.

Charge2Go is available for \$19.99 (U.S.) at www.charge2go.com, in five colours and a choice of connectors for Nokia, Sony/ Ericsson, Samsung, Siemens or Motorola phones. Additional connectors are available for \$2.99 (U.S.) each.

The up-and-comer She's got one eye on the corner office, the other on the after-hours club. Between memos to the boss and instant- messaging with friends, it's a miracle she's only a week behind on her e-mail.

The gift Fido's Danger Hiptop is a Blackberry for people whose datebooks include actual dates. This combination phone, PDA and wireless client lets its user make calls, do AOL Instant Messaging, send e-mail, play games and browse the Web from anywhere there is cellphone reception. Tri-band service means it will work during a European vacation or Asian business trip. With a screen that swivels to reveal a keyboard, this gadget is stylish enough for the dance floor, functional enough for the board room.

The Tri-band Hiptop is \$275 with a 2-year Fido service agreement, or \$475 at full price. Available in stores or at www.fido.ca.

The stocking stuffer All that mobile Web browsing, e-mailing and AIMing can really rack up a bill. Set her up with a plan that covers unlimited data use for everything except SMS messages - and with built-in Instant Messaging, who uses SMS?

Fido's unlimited data plan for Hiptop users is \$20 a month through www.fido.ca, and must be combined with a monthly airtime package for making phone calls.

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