

# Don't Gimme Those Straining-My-Hands-at-the-Laptop Blues

By Rachel R. Hartman

"Dear Santa Claus: I have been very good this year. This Christmas I want a shiny new laptop, preferably Pentium III with a CD-ROM or DVD drive, a high-speed modem, a 6-gig hard drive, and a few hundred megs of RAM. I promise to leave extra cookies and milk for you, and carrots for the reindeer."

Unfortunately, St. Nick didn't leave a notebook under the tree. Instead, my alpha geek husband and I hit the post-Christmas weekend sales. I had been thinking about purchasing a laptop for many months. My desktop computer really needed to be reserved for my day job, especially with my new telecommuting requirements. We're anticipating a lot of travel in the near future, and I wanted to be able to write whenever our itinerary permitted. Previous writing experiments with a legal pad and pen in our truck or in hotel rooms had proven unsatisfactory, thanks to my years of composing on a keyboard and less-than-perfect penmanship. If I kept the battery charged, I could write during a blackout. With an alpha geek husband (who had worked on laptops during his tech support grunt days) to help me with the technical specs, it was all over bar the shopping and the payments, right?

Well, not quite. Before I had turned 30, I had already undergone bilateral carpal tunnel release surgery, which means I have matching vertical scars on my palms and a spiffy set of custom-fitted braces. Thanks to an ergonomic home workstation and keyboard, my carpal tunnel syndrome has been quiescent since my last surgery. Unfortunately, a carpal tunnel release isn't like an appendectomy: undergoing the surgery cannot guarantee permanent resolution of the problem. My hand surgeon explained very firmly that if I don't continue to take care of my hands, I'll undo his good work. I now live approximately a thousand miles away from this excellent sur-

geon, and I want my CTS to stay in remission.

So deciding on the usual technical specs was only the first step. It was very important for me to buy a comfortable laptop with decent-sized keys, sufficient space to rest my wrists, and a large screen with a decent display that could be angled where I needed it. When comfort is such an important consideration, there's no substitute for actually laying hands on a machine, so we headed to our favorite computer store.

After checking out just about every available floor model, I finally settled on a 1200 series Compaq Presario. The post-Christmas sale price was within our budget, the technical specifications were acceptable, and the keyboard felt good under my hands. We picked up some necessary accessories, endured the long checkout line, then headed home.

Once the software was installed and my fiction and research folders were moved over to the notebook, I christened it Miranda (short for Memoranda) and happily prepared to start writing ... and immediately realized I'd forgotten something. Where was I going to work? My home office workstation was covered by my desktop computer and other accessories. Besides, since I spent 8 to 10 hours a day in the office, I wanted a break in environment when I was writing. I took Miranda out to the living room and settled on the sofa. Then I moved to our armchair. Then I tried our papa-san chair. I didn't try the floor because we have four cats, who were already very interested in what I was doing. No matter where I moved, I faced the problem of keeping the laptop balanced and centered. Crossed legs, half-lotus, legs stretched out and braced on the coffee table or footstool, it didn't matter. Sooner or later I felt the notebook's heat, or developed cramps in my legs or feet. It was worse when we traveled over New

Year's, as I discovered when I sat hunched over the laptop on a hotel bed. It's hard to maintain the OSHA-recommended posture when you're not using a good office chair or desk, which is one of the reasons why OSHA recommends ergonomic office furniture. At the very least, though, I wanted to keep the notebook someplace steady and centered so I could avoid straining my neck, shoulders, and arms.

Should I buy another desk for the laptop? That's certainly one solution. Office furniture stores sell small computer desks suitable for notebook users. There are even stands designed specifically for laptops: elaborate, fully adjustable metal creations that can be used while standing, sitting in a chair, or reclining in bed; and telescoping tripods that collapse to a convenient bundle suitable for strapping to your notebook case.

A docking station can help you tackle the problem from a different angle. Docking stations allow notebook users to expand the number and types of connections. With a docking station, you can add an external monitor, a standard (or ergonomic) keyboard, a mouse, etc. Some docking stations have options for another hard drive, different video card, more expansion ports, or joining a local area network (LAN). Using a docking station lets you take advantage of the most comfortable keyboard and/or mouse you can buy. Docking stations vary, so check with your local computer dealer for more information about the docking station for your laptop.

But mobility is one of a notebook's most attractive qualities, and I wanted to be able to go wherever I wanted to write—a sofa, a hotel bed, or an armchair. Ideally, I'd find something that wouldn't cost too much, could be packed along for trips, and could either be stowed safely away from our four cats or would be sturdy enough to withstand their explorations.

I searched the Web, and discovered a Canadian company called Laidback We - R- Inc., and a product they call the Laptop Laidback Portable Table. The design is very similar to a breakfast tray, except that the flat table surface can be angled, rather like a drafting table. Their web site (<http://www.laptop-laidback.com/>) featured secure online ordering, customer testimonials, extensive photographs and diagrams of the table, plus complete measurements. The customer testimonials included raves from wheelchair users and patients recovering from back surgery, giving me greater confidence that I had found my ergonomic solution. Best of all, if I didn't splurge for express shipping, the total price would come to just under US\$100. (Because this is a Canadian company, the exchange rate may vary; the site includes a currency converter for your convenience.)

I placed my order, and the next day received a friendly form-letter notification of shipment, including a UPS Canada tracking number and my package's ETA. The company also reiterated the cost in Canadian versus US dollars, and confirmed the exchange rate for the date of my order. I was pleased and impressed with this small company's customer service.

As of this writing, the delivery of my portable table is still a week away, but my search inspired me to dig out a breakfast tray given to me as a wedding present five years ago. While my laptop fits just fine on the tray, I can't adjust the height or angle to a more comfortable position, which can lead to cramps in my shoulders if I type for too long. However, since bodies and breakfast trays come in all sizes, you may wish to try this yourself; you might discover a breakfast tray is your ideal ergonomic laptop table. For me, it's not a perfect solution, but it'll do until the real thing lands on my porch.

#### Related Articles:

Choosing the Right Laptop for You (TechTV's Screen Savers) <http://www.techtv.com/screensavers/showtell/story/0,23008,2145909,00.html>

Sixth Annual Laptop Torture Test (PC Computing) <http://www.zdnet.com/pccomp/features/excl0498/torture/welcome.html>

Prepare Your Laptop for Vacation Travel (TechTV's Call for Help) <http://www.techtv.com/callforhelp/soho/story/0,23008,2281172,00.html>

#### Products:

The Comfort Store's Laptop Table/Sit to Stand Workstation <http://stores.yahoo.com/comfortstore/sisimressitt.html>

Modern Office's Adjustable Mobile Laptop Workstation <http://store.yahoo.com/modernoffice/admoblapwor.html>

Laptop Laidback Portable Table <http://www.laptop-laidback.com/>

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