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Small laptops pose a big security threat

Ultraportables forgo size, weight, power -- and security.

 By **John Edwards**

December 22, 2008 12:00 PM ET

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Computerworld - They're highly portable, inexpensive, very popular -- and a potential security nightmare. Running against the trend of mobile computers featuring progressively larger processors, memory, storage, screens and price tags, [ultraportable laptops](#) promise to streamline and simplify their users' lives. [Easy to carry](#), capable of running only a handful of modest applications and affordably priced, ultraportables have emerged over the past year or so to become one of the [hottest mobile computing trends](#).

Pioneered by Taiwanese PC maker [Asustek Computer Inc.](#) with its [Eee PC](#) and now also available from vendors such as [Dell](#), [Hewlett-Packard](#) and Fujitsu, ultraportables are designed to appeal to users who need portable systems with more power and functionality than a smart phone but don't want to lug a conventional laptop through offices, hotels and airports.

"It's a technology with great appeal to many people," observes Gabriel Vitus, IT director at the Certified General Accountants' Association of Canada, a trade organization in Vancouver, British Columbia.

That small package comes with built-in compromises, however. Ultraportables typically feature a processor that lags at least a generation or two behind the CPUs included in traditional laptops, a few gigabytes of solid-state memory and storage, a squeezed-down display and a cramped keyboard. But another characteristic of the new portable pipsqueaks is striking fear into the hearts of a growing number of IT managers: security weaknesses that are directly attributable to the machines' diminished technology.

"This is a threat that IT managers are just beginning to recognize," says Brian Wolfe, a security analyst at Lazarus Technologies Inc., an IT consulting service in Itasca, Ill.

Reduced Resources

Minimized hardware resources force ultraportables -- and their users -- to cope with weakened system software. Most models ship with a stripped-down Linux operating system or, in some cases, Microsoft Corp.'s previous-generation operating system, Windows XP. Newer and more capable operating systems, which also tend to have the latest internal security safeguards, demand processing and storage power that ultraportables typically lack, Wolfe notes.

Ultraportables' reduced resources also limit their ability to run add-on security

“The machines are often sent out into the world with little or no protection.”

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Brian Wolfe, Security Analyst, Lazarus Technologies

With processing power, internal memory and storage space all at a premium, it can be difficult -- sometimes impossible -- to squeeze security software onto an ultraportable. "As a result, the machines are often sent out into the world with little or no protection," Wolfe says.

Vendors' use of dated software can also make ultraportables more susceptible to various malware. Earlier this year, for example, Brazilian security firm Rise Security released an alert that showed that old, unpatched Samba code found on the [Eee PC](#) allowed the machine to be subverted ("rooted") right out of the box. Such vulnerabilities allow hackers to remotely gain complete control over the systems.

Other key security features are often absent on ultraportables. "Many, if not most, [ultraportables] are sold without Trusted Platform Modules because they are targeted at the consumer market," says [Rob Enderle](#), an analyst at Enderle Group in San Jose. "This means they either don't have encryption solutions or the solutions aren't that robust."

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