BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

Using PDAs in libraries: a how-to-do-it manual. By Colleen Cuddy. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers (©Medical Library Association), 2005. 145 pages (soft cover). ISBN 1-55570-543-X. CAN$85.80.[1]

Does your library already offer services and resources for users of personal digital assistants (PDAs)? Or are you at a point where you need to find the time to learn about handheld computers, since more and more of your patrons are carrying them? Whether you are a mobile informatics expert or a PDA newbie, you will find this book, the first pocket computer guide written especially for librarians, to be a highly practical reference.

Although written for a wide audience, including academic, public, and special librarians, there is plenty of content in this book for hospital and health sciences librarians. Colleen Cuddy is the assistant director for library systems at the Ehrman Medical Library, New York University, and her book was published in cooperation with the Medical Library Association.

Cuddy provides a brief history of PDAs and describes the four operating system platforms: Palm, Windows, Symbian, and Blackberry. She compares various devices; however, the newest models such as the Palm LifeDrive and Palm T|X were not available at time of publication. She predicts that PDAs are not a passing craze but rather will evolve into new technologies such as PDA-phone hybrids. The author explains the four kinds of wireless connectivity: WiFi (wireless fidelity), cellular, Bluetooth, and infrared. Peripherals such as keyboards, cameras, and bar code readers are described, as well as lesser-known ones such as FM radios that plug into the PDA's card slot. We already know about roaming reference; PDA card swipe attachments would enable roaming circulation!

In the chapter on PDA applications in the library setting, Cuddy opens by describing how librarians can use PDAs as personal productivity tools (e.g., calendar, address book, to do list, document reader). Next comes the most valuable section of the book — how PDAs can fit into the day-to-day operations of the library. Librarians can use wireless PDAs to answer instant messaging (IM) queries on the fly. Patrons can read e-books on their PDA (but must first download e-book reader software). Overall, says Cuddy, the Internet is not yet ready for PDA Web browsing because most Web sites have not taken the small screen size of PDAs into account. Most integrated library system (ILS) vendors, reports the author, seem to have a product in the works to support viewing the online public access catalogue (OPAC) on a mobile device, enabling users to search the catalogue while in the stacks. For instruction, screen capture software allows librarians to capture PDA screenshots for handouts, presentations, or Web tutorials, and emulators allow students to emulate PDAs on a personal computer.

The chapter on collection development demystifies the various PDA product models: free, free with existing licensed product, user add-on purchase, institutional site license, set number of downloads, and electronic loaning with due dates. Cuddy encourages arranging product trials and includes a product evaluation checklist. Always a librarian, she even provides examples of how to catalogue PDA resources.

The chapter on reference resource software gives librarians a sense of what types of software, whether free or commercial, are available in the key subject areas of humanities; law; sciences, engineering, and mathematics; and medical–health science. For the latter, there are increasingly popular (but costly) all-in-one products that incorporate several features — such as searching MEDLINE, browsing tables of contents, reading abstracts, consulting clinical guidelines, and receiving drug updates and news alerts — all in one interface. Cuddy describes how to search MEDLINE using a PDA, whether in real time using a wireless PDA or asynchronously (the database is queried when the PDA is synchronized to the desktop computer). Drug databases and drug look-up e-books are briefly described. The author provides vendors and sources for textbooks, clinical guidelines, and evidence-based medicine (EBM) tools. JournalToGo is free and allows users to read National Library of Medicine abstracts and Reuters news articles, as well as subscribe to current awareness specialty "channels" such as family practice and oncology. For more in-depth treatment of specific health sciences applications, I recommend the book *Handhelds in medicine: a practical guide for clinicians*[2] or the Dalhousie University Faculty of Medicine's Web site *Recommendations for handheld hardware and software*.[3]

For more advanced readers, Cuddy explains how to create PDA-friendly Web sites, and gives examples of libraries that "push" content to their users using AvantGo. Libraries can circulate PDAs, PDA peripherals, and PDA books on memory expansion cards. My favorite section is on recycling older PDAs, whose life cycle is about 2 years. Who would have thought that old PDAs could be used as remote controls for DVD players, projectors, and TVs? Marketing and promotion, including establishing PDA user groups (PUGs) are discussed. The author also addresses security, for example, passwords and time-out features to lock the PDA, necessary if the device contains any patient information.

Cuddy's book would have saved me a great deal of time when I started learning about PDAs several years ago. Understandable language, plenty of screen shots, and generous white space all belie how comprehensive this manual really is. The book is admirably current considering the transience of its subject matter, yet I hope that Cuddy is already planning a second edition to help librarians interpret and evaluate rapidly changing PDA technology and applications.

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[1] The Canadian distributor is the Ontario Library Association OLAStore.

[2] Strayer SM, Reynolds PL, Ebell MH. *Handhelds in medicine: a practical guide for clinicians*. New York: Springer; 2005.

[3] Dalhousie University Faculty of Medicine. *Recommendations for handheld hardware and software*. 6th ed. 2005 Spring [cited 2006 Apr 10]. Available from http://handheld.medicine.dal.ca/.