

## Notebooks for the Electronic Age

By Hiroyuki Yamamuro

**T**hey measure only 80mm by 143mm, and are a scant 14mm thick. Yet tiny though they may be, they are having a mighty impact in the world of Japanese business. They are electronic memo books, IC cards that take the place of the scribbled, dog-eared booklets that Japanese executives have traditionally slipped into their suit pockets. Able to tell their owners everything from the time of their next appointment to the batting averages of favorite baseball players, the notebooks are enjoying explosive popularity in a nation where nothing sells better than novelty combined with a healthy dose of down-home practicality.

The 145-gram notebooks are complete electronic systems, with LCD readouts and push-button controls. What makes them unique, however, is that their functions change completely depending on which IC card has been inserted. The most representative card is the phone list. It is programmed to hold and read back the name, telephone number, company and address of the user's important contacts. Instead of fumbling through a battered notebook, all he need do is punch in the name he is seeking on the mini-keyboard, and out comes all the information, displayed in Japanese characters.

Equally useful is the schedule card, which can search out the day, time, name, location and other key information about appointments and meetings. Moreover, when used in conjunction with a calendar function, the scheduler can be used to trigger a blinking light that alerts the harried executive that he has a commitment that day. The card can be programmed a whole month in advance. The notebooks also have electronic memo files for data such as the owner's passport number and health insurance code, as well as a 10-digit calculator function.

Moreover, IC cards already on the market can give the machines, for just ¥7,000 (\$52 at the rate of ¥135/\$), the ability to translate back and forth between a 12,000-word English vocabulary list and a 15,800-word Japanese list. Then there's the ¥10,000 Kanji dictionary, showing the correct way to write no less than 34,000 ideographs and compounds. The pro



Electronic memo books: Initially aimed at businessmen in their 40s, they are enjoying explosive popularity among a range of age groups.

baseball card, a ¥10,000 accessory card, gives not only all key pro baseball statistics, but the dates of all the season's scheduled games. In Japanese business circles that could be almost as useful as the *karaoke* card, which holds in its memory the lyrics for approximately 500 songs the unwary executive might find himself asked to sing at one of Tokyo's ubiquitous *karaoke* sing-along bars.

Who lies behind this latest round of technological one-upmanship? Sharp Corp. can probably take the credit. Since putting its notebooks on sale in January 1987, it has gone on to claim an 80% share of a market that has expanded to ¥25 billion in just two years and is expected to eventually reach ¥100 billion annually. Casio Computer, Sony and Canon have also gotten in on the act, but Sharp's tale is the most illustrative. Sales started at only 20,000 a month, but by spring this year were running at more than 150,000, with cumulative sales exceeding 1 million. This for a pocket-size novelty item sporting a ¥19,800 (\$147) price tag.

"We zeroed in on businessmen in their 40s," explains a Sharp official. "They are the corporate shock troops who form the nucleus of Japanese society, and they are constantly caught up in planning and sales. The one thing they don't have enough of is time.

"Their eyesight is starting to weaken, they're crowded like sardines into packed commuter trains. The print in conventional memo books is tiny, and there's no room in the train to peer at them. But with an IC card, everything's taken care of at the push of a button."

But while the 40s set are certainly buying, businessmen in their 20s and 30s have also become keen electronic memo enthusiasts. And at least one reason for that is the Tokyo telephone directory.

One doesn't have to be getting near-sighted not to want to use the Tokyo phone book issued by Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corp. (NTT) which comes to 26 volumes, containing nearly 3.7 million numbers, and stacking up into a pile a full meter high. The print is tiny. The businessman who forgets his memo book could spend all day just trying to look up telephone numbers. And business cards, while a big help, usually give phone numbers in tiny print that leads to dialing errors, a problem so widespread that NTT and some of Japan's biggest trading companies are working on a system for using bar codes instead of numbers on the cards. Special telephones would read the codes, and dial the numbers automatically.

The electronic memo seems at least one answer to these annoying headaches. Sharp, hoping its appeal will prove universal, has already sent market researchers to the United States to assess potential demand there. Meanwhile, longer and longer commutes into overcrowded Tokyo, the growing importance of rapid access to information, and a Japanese fascination with high tech suggest that electronic memo books will soon no longer be a novelty, but an essential part of the Japanese businessman's outfit. ■

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