workshop

Synching feeling

A surprising number of people use their mobile devices as little more than electronic organisers and never bother exploiting their full potential by synchronising information with their office PC. Ben Camm-Jones shows you just how easy it is to share data between a notebook or handheld and a PC

Mobile computing is an increasingly popular way of working. It frees users from the constraints of the office, enabling us to work in a way that fits in with our lifestyles – rather than keeping us tethered to our desks.

Not only can we use familiar applications (albeit, in the case of handheld PCs, a cut-down version with fewer features) while out and about, we can receive updates and amendments to files in the same way we'd be able to if we were in the office.

For our part, we can send back urgent meeting reports and updated contact information while still on the road, so colleagues can immediately get to work chasing lucrative contracts.

There are obvious advantages to sharing files between several computers. If you want to work from home or on the road then you will need a quick and easy method of transferring the files you have been working on to your PC system in the office. For small businesses that may not have a network, being able to share such data dynamically can also be a real boon.
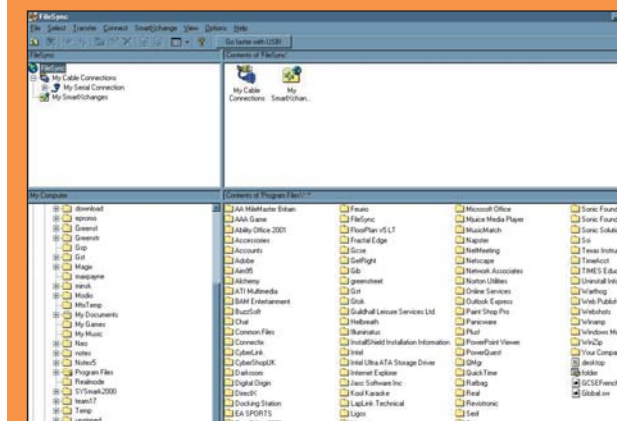
Built-in email and data sharing functions mean handheld PCs, laptops and PDAs (personal digital assistants) come into their own, and the functions require only a few minutes to set up and start using.
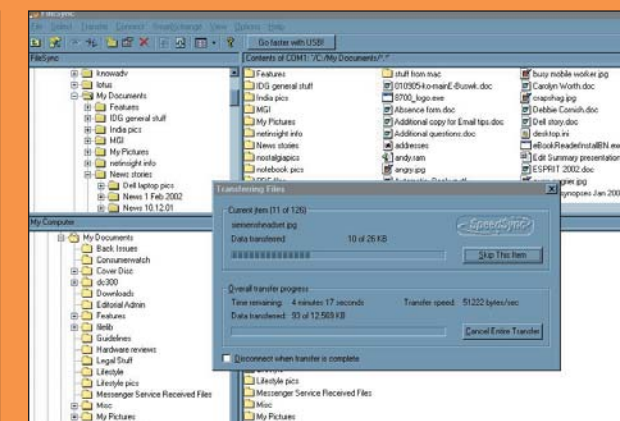
ILLUSTRATION: JESS READ

Transferring files from a notebook

Before you can start synchronising, you need to have a copy of the file in question on both your desktop and notebook. FileSync lets you do this simply by dragging and dropping the file from your PC to your notebook using its four-pane interface. Once you have installed the software and have connected the two PCs with the necessary cable, follow the steps below.

1 FileSync's interface has four separate sections. The top left of the screen shows all your cable connections. Select one of these connections to view information about it, displayed in the top righthand side section. The bottom half of the interface displays information about your PC. On the left you can see the drives you have access to and if you select one of these its contents will be displayed in the lower right section of the screen
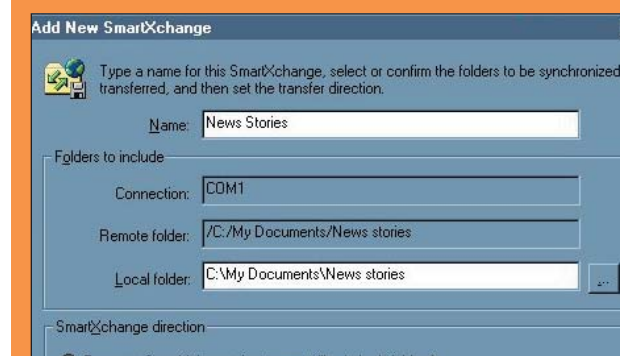
2 Transferring a file is a simple drag-and-drop process. Firstly, click on the cable connection in the top left. The contents of the PC you are connected to should appear in the top righthand section. Drag a file from the top right and release it into a folder in one of the lower panes. The file has now been transferred from one system to the other
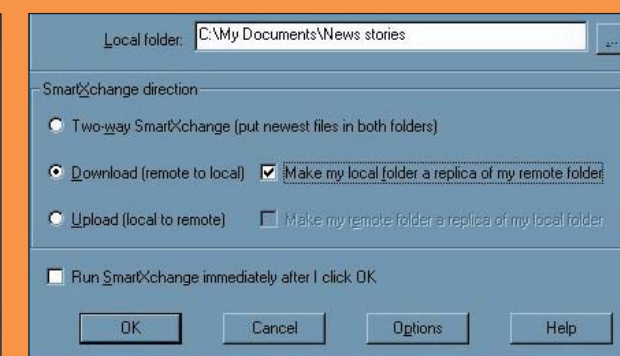
Synchronising notebook and desktop files

It's all very well transferring files between two or more PCs or between your PC and your notebook, but if you wish to update a file after it has been transferred then you don't want to have to go through the entire process again. You can cut down on time spent updating files you have transferred already by using a file synchronising program. This software will send changes and additions to the original file automatically, so you don't have to think about updating a file on, say, your desktop PC once you've changed the copy on your notebook.

FileSync makes this possible by creating a dynamic link between your desktop and your notebook using what it calls a SmartXchange. This lets you synchronise files on demand and will ensure that you have the most up-to-date files whichever computer you want to work on.

1 With the FileSync software installed and the two systems connected, you now need to select which folders and files you wish to be updated automatically each time you use the SmartXchange. Click on Add New SmartXchange and browse to the relevant folder(s) on your desktop. Check that the same folder is selected under both Remote and Local folder and then click ok

2 Once you have selected the folders that you wish FileSync to update dynamically, you will need to give them an appropriate name so you can find them easily in the SmartXchange folder. Choose whether the software should update the most recent version of the file from the notebook or from the desktop PC. You can click on Two-way SmartXchange to put the most up-to-date file on both systems. Then you have finished – it is as simple as that
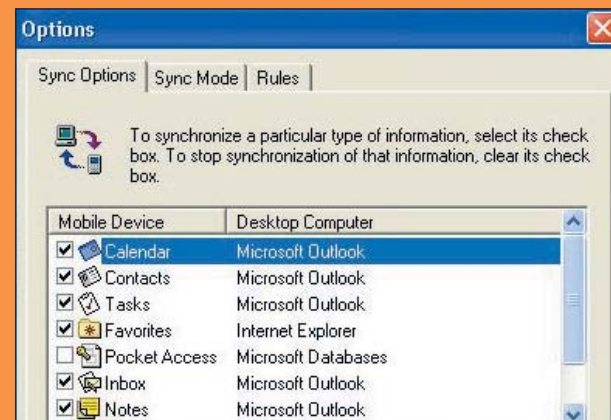
Using Microsoft ActiveSync to share PDA files

Handheld PC users will almost certainly find software provided with their device that enables file sharing between it and a desktop PC. Usually, a suitable connection cable will also be provided. Here we are going to share files by connecting a Pocket PC-based PDA (personal digital assistant) to a PC via the USB port, though it can also be connected to your PC via a serial or infrared port. Pocket PC devices come preinstalled with Microsoft's ActiveSync file-sharing software.
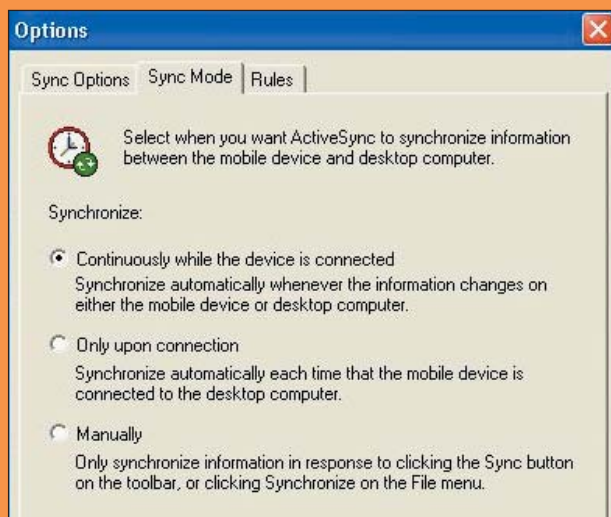
1 Install ActiveSync on your PC before placing the PDA in its docking cradle and connecting it to the PC using the USB cable. ActiveSync will automatically detect the PDA. Specify whether you want to synchronise it with one or two PCs. Choose two if you want it to work with home and office PCs
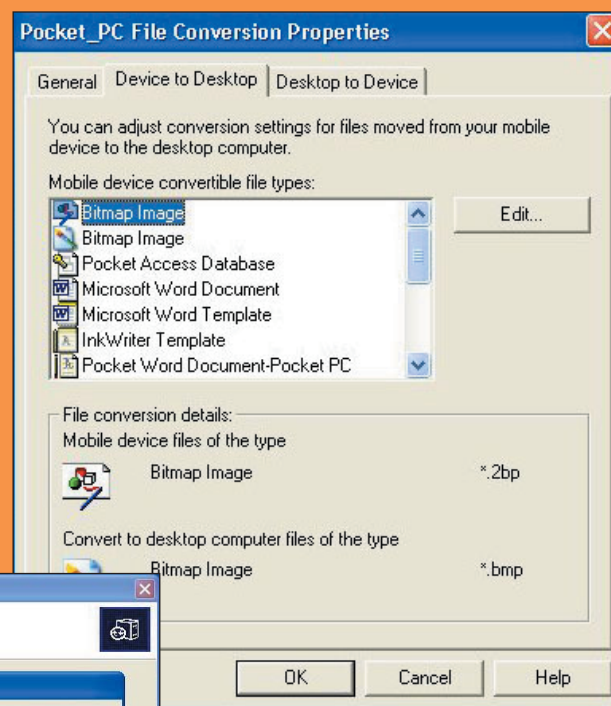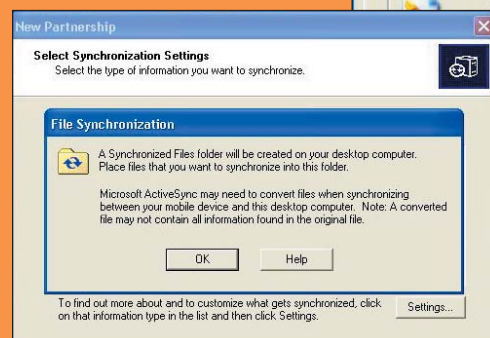
2 Now select the types of file you wish to synchronise. Right-click an option to get details before checking its box to add it to the synchronisation list. ActiveSync will then check both your PC and the PDA for files of the types specified and ask you how it should handle certain file types. You are then asked whether the PDA should update files from the desktop or vice versa

3 Depending on the way you work, you may wish information entered into your PDA to be updated automatically each time you connect it to your desktop PC. If you want more control over the file-synchronisation process, select Manually under Options, Sync Mode. Now, when you want to transfer a file, hit the green Sync button on the File menu
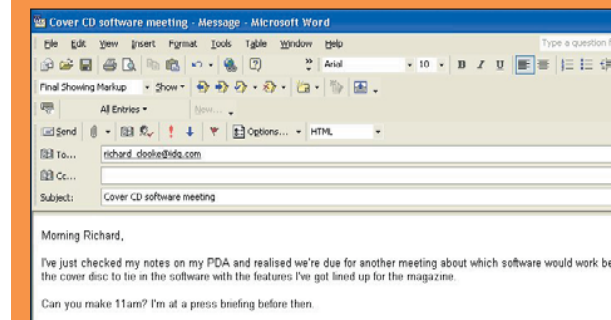
4 Because the Pocket PC operating system uses cut-down versions of the more familiar Windows applications and has far less memory, it may need to convert certain file types, such as images, into different formats. You can accept or reject these changes using the Pocket PC Properties dialog
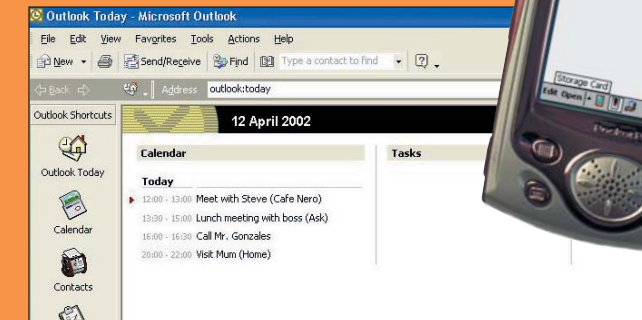
Email access with Pocket Outlook

If your handheld PC is set up for email access you can keep in touch with the office while you're out on the road attending meet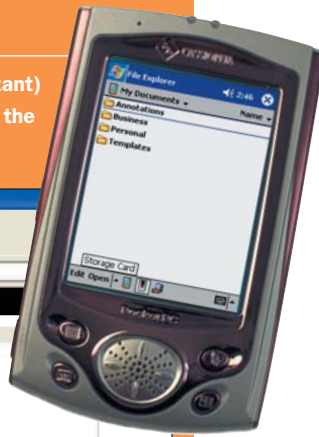ings. Unfortunately, because Pocket PC is a Microsoft product, the PDA (personal digital assistant) software has been designed to work with the company's own email client, Outlook.

1 When you installed ActiveSync on your desktop PC, one of the options was to synchronise files with Outlook. If you didn't select this initially, go to the main ActiveSync menu, choose Options and tick Contacts. Compose an email in the usual way, launching Microsoft Outlook and using Word as the text editor

2 If the person you are emailing is already in your Contacts list, the program should recognise their name when you hit Send. Assuming your PDA is still attached to your PC (or within synching range if you chose constant updates) both the Outbox on your desktop and your mobile device should now show that the message has been sent

FileSync: making synchronising a cinch

In this workshop we've used LapLink's FileSync to synchronise data between a notebook and a desktop PC quickly and easily. This handy package costs around £25 and is bundled with a blue serial cable that allows you to connect the two devices in order to transfer files. As shown in the box entitled *Synchronising notebook and desktop files* on page 159, FileSync lets you create SmartXchanges – that is, predefined transfer jobs that will synchronise any of your local and remote folders on demand. The software and the cable are compatible with most versions of Windows from 95 onwards, so you can connect and transfer files between virtually any two systems. Contact LapLink on 0870 241 0983, or visit its website at www.laplink.com/uk. There is a full version of FileSync on our cover disc.

In order to transfer files between your desktop PC and notebook you will need to connect the devices with the serial cable that comes bundled with the software. The cable connects to the serial ports on both machines and will transfer files at speeds of 0.4Mbps (megabits per second). You can also transfer files between two desktop systems if they are within a cable's length of each other.

If you have USB ports on both the PC and the laptop you can benefit from faster transfer speeds (up to 5Mbps) by investing in LapLink's £25 USB network cable. If you need to be able to transfer files quickly then this added expense is well worth considering. However, if you're in no great hurry then there is no need to splash out on any extras as the serial cable available with FileSync will suit your needs perfectly.

Setup instructions for FileSync will vary depending on whether or not you have a CD-ROM drive. If you do, simply follow the instructions that appear onscreen; if not, you'll need to install Java Virtual Machine from the CD and then choose Make Disc. PCs running Windows 95 may not have Windows Sockets 2.0 files. Download these from www.laplink.com/support.

Sharing files with a PDA

Though notebooks are designed to be portable, when it comes to convenience, you can't beat a PDA. Laptops can be a pain to lug around, particularly if you've got other baggage to carry. A PDA can be slipped easily into a pocket, so it's the ideal solution for people constantly on the move. Synchronising files between your PDA and your PC, then, is necessary if you want to have up-to-date data on both systems.

Microsoft ActiveSync is bundled with many PDAs. However, if you don't have ActiveSync, you can download it for free from www.microsoft.com/mobile/pocketpc/downloads/activesync35.asp. Please note, though, that you will only be able to use ActiveSync if your PDA uses a Microsoft Pocket PC operating system.

Alternatively, there's LapLink's PDASync software, which costs around £25 if you download it directly from LapLink's website. This application works in a similar way to ActiveSync but also supports most of the major PC operating systems as well as Palm 3.0 and 4.0, Windows CE 1.0 and 2.X, Pocket PC 3.0 and Casio Pocket Viewer PDA operating systems.

Synchronise email access

If you have Microsoft Outlook on your PC and your PDA also uses a Microsoft-based operating system then you will be able to synchronise appointments, contact book entries and email. Many people have Outlook on their PCs but prefer to use the email service provided by their ISP. However, as it integrates a calendar and contact book with email, as well as providing you with a notepad and task list, it is a very handy application. Please note that ActiveSync does not support Outlook 97. ■

Try FileSync and PDASync which are available on this month's cover disc