

behind the news

Are megahertz the only measure? *PC Advisor* readers don't think so, with just a quarter of you rating clock speed as the best indicator of processor performance. And now the suppliers are coming round to the idea as well. Ursula Seymour finds out more

Despite years of unrelenting increases in processor megahertz ratings, *PC Advisor* tests have found that high clock speeds don't automatically add up to faster PCs. We carried out a poll on our website (www.pcadvisor.co.uk) to see if our visitors still relied on megahertz as a measure of performance, and the results showed that we aren't alone in rejecting this concept. A total of 71.1 percent of the 2,142 visitors who voted disagreed with the statement 'Megahertz is the most important measure when considering processor performance.'

Consumer choices

But comments on our ConsumerWatch forum indicated that megahertz could still be an important factor for first-time buyers or those less educated about PCs: "The average punter... sees an Intel chip rated at 2GHz and an AMD at 1.53GHz and immediately thinks the Intel is the faster and better chip," says visitor David Rich.

Jeremy Fennell, marketing manager for PC World, disagrees, saying his company's experience of what shoppers wanted did not reflect this. "We put together a low-spec PC with the fastest processor available, and we had very limited sales success [with it]," he explained. Fennell believes "processor speed is important (to consumers), but only in conjunction with other features."

This viewpoint was backed up on our forum as well, where many visitors said they considered additional features at least as important as the processor speed. "I would not just look for the megahertz of a system when going to purchase a new one. There are other factors to take into account... [including] how much RAM is installed and the type of graphics card," says site visitor, Alan Godward.

Any other name

It also finds support from perhaps the key instigator of the move away from megahertz as a measure of performance: AMD. The chip manufacturer introduced a new naming protocol with its Athlon XP processor, which doesn't have a clock speed rating. Instead AMD provides what it terms a 'true performance indicator', which shows how it stacks up compared to a 1.4GHz Athlon, its base processor. Therefore the speed of the 2200+, its latest release, is the equivalent of a 2.2GHz Athlon, although it only runs at 1.8GHz.

Robert Stead, AMD's European marketing director, dismisses the idea of comparing processors from different manufacturers by megahertz ratings: "Clock speed is only a measure of processor performance if architectures are the same. If you are looking at different processors – for example, the Athlon versus the Pentium 4 – the architectures are completely different," he asserts.



"Clock speed is only a measure of processor performance if architectures are the same"

Robert Stead, European marketing director, AMD

Despite being the prime culprit when it comes to hyping clock speed, even Intel believes that the megahertz rating of the CPU is "only one of the things you should consider when buying a PC", according to UK PR Mathias Raeck. He says that the company is "not only emphasising gigahertz, but features, too, such as USB 2.0 and integrated wireless", as factors customers should look for in a PC.

AMD was the first to reject the megahertz race, instead trying to come up with a measure of true processor performance. And many PC purchasers are following suit and looking at many other factors when it comes to choosing a PC.

Now AMD is trying to influence this bigger picture, too, and Stead said that it is trying to come up with a true performance indicator for the entire PC: "We are driving for something that rates the performance of the PC as a whole." He suggested the idea of rating PCs to indicate which tasks they would be best suited to, such as word processing or games. "The aim is to help out those less knowledgeable about PCs," he explains.

But Stead admits that coming up with such a rating "is not going to be a two-minute job. It's a real departure for an industry that has lived off clock speed." ■