NEC PowerMate ML7

PC PRO A LIST

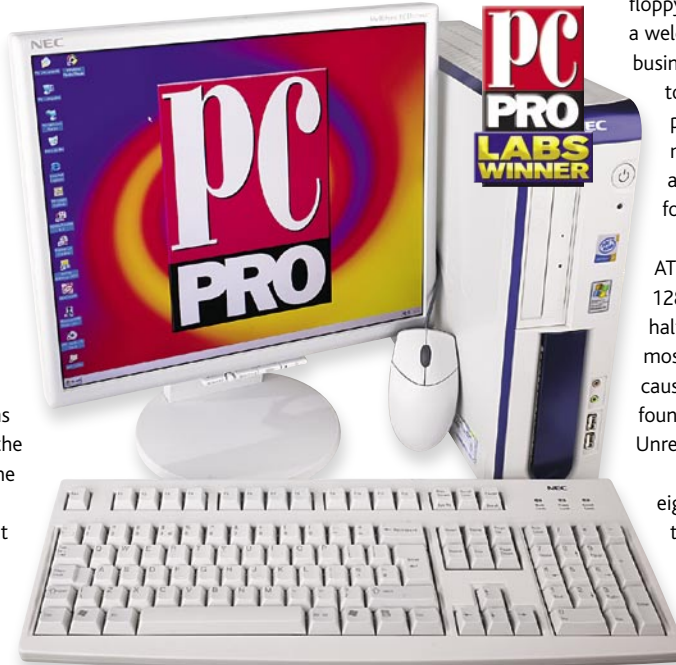**PRICE** £759 (£892 inc VAT) **SUPPLIER** NEC Computers 0870 010 6322

VERDICT Plain-looking, but lots of power, a terrific monitor and a great warranty make the NEC our pick of the business PCs. This is a great-value proposition.

At first glance, the ML7 isn't a contender for the Labs Winner award. It's significantly less graceful-looking than the other systems and, according to Gartner, NEC trails behind both Dell and HP for market share. But don't be swayed by these facts – the PowerMate should be right at the top of your shortlist if you're planning a large-scale roll-out of desktop PCs this year.

First off, let's get the criticisms out of the way. Beige is ugly and the ML7 is very beige. What's more, the keyboard and mouse are slightly different shades of beige and don't even match the system unit. Also, the keyboard will be an anathema to the quiet office – the keys have a positive feel to them, but fast typing generates lots of noise. The optical mouse feels like a budget product too. Finally, the system unit isn't the smallest around. You can't tell easily from the pictures, but it's 410mm deep and 348mm wide.

Thankfully, the ML7 is designed to be mounted upright, where the 98mm thickness really helps to minimise the footprint. And, you only need to glance at the feature table on p102 to see how the specification eclipses the more expensive machines.

In particular, NEC has really gone to town with the monitor, bundling the excellent MultiSync LCD1770NX. This 17in TFT was the best this month by a mile – it's

Despite the dull styling, the NEC sports a great TFT and warranty for such a low price.

height-adjustable, has a super-thin silver bezel and an innovative menu system. Image quality is better than expected for a bundled monitor too, and it's the only one to boast a DVI interface, which means no setup hassles and no clock synchronisation interference.

There are no compromises inside the system either. The ML7 features a gigabyte of RAM and a 3GHz Pentium 4; our benchmarks reported a decent score of 1.66. Although the Dell OptiPlex GX280 SFF was faster, in the real world the difference will be largely imperceptible.

The ML7 also had the largest hard disk on test – the 120GB Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 will handle media files without hassle, while its Serial ATA interface helps with airflow. About 10GB of the 120GB is taken up with an emergency recovery partition, accessible during the system boot sequence. Like Acer's, this partition is invisible to Windows, and hence can't be corrupted, either by

inadvertent user action or malicious viruses. Once loaded, the recovery program can either restore Windows to a previous point, or restore the disk image to its original state.

NEC has installed its own ND-3500AG DVD writer, compatible with all formats of writable DVD (except DVD-RAM) including dual-layer discs. Considering the lack of a floppy drive or other removable storage, this is a welcome addition, if a little overkill for most businesses. For users who wish to back up data to a central server, Realtek's RTL8110SB provides gigabit Ethernet. The MSI motherboard boasts PCI Express – yet another bonus, especially if you're looking for maximum future-proofing.

The tour de force continues with the ATi X300. As seen on the Dell but with 128MB instead of 64MB of RAM, the half-height PCI Express card will handle most 3D tasks with ease – and without causing the price to jump too high. We found it produced a consistent 35fps in Unreal Tournament 2004 at 1,024 x 768.

In terms of connectivity, the ML7 has eight USB 2 ports, two of which are at the front along with headphone and microphone sockets. The keyboard and mouse use the PS/2 ports and there's six-channel audio, which is overkill.

Not only has NEC built a great PC for a great price, but all the services you could ask for are available as well. Bespoke disk imaging is cheap at £7 per unit, while network pre-configuration costs just £3 per PC. On-site installation is best done in-house, though, as NEC charges £50 per unit.

NEC offers a three-year on-site, next-business-day warranty, while engineers replacing components will like the tool-less chassis. The case isn't as easy to get into as either the Dell or IBM, but once open the rack holding the drives swings up to allow access to the CPU and RAM, while the drives themselves are also in sliding racks. There's a spare bay for an external or internal 3.5in drive, and four spare Serial ATA ports on the motherboard, so adding a second hard disk won't be a problem.

This specification, which beats everything else on test, would still be great value at £100 more, but as it costs only £759 with such a good warranty we simply can't recommend the Dell above it. The keyboard may be noisy and the case unappealing compared to the svelte IBM, but the monitor is superb and the machine is as future-proofed as you could ask from an office PC. If you can live with the looks and the general absence of security measures, the ML7 is a great investment.

Inside the ML7, there's plenty of room for expansion and it's relatively easy to work on thanks to the tool-less drive racks.

PC PRO RATINGS

PERFORMANCE	★★★★☆
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★