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December 1, 1998 6 minutes read This story appears in the December 1998 issue of HomeOfficeMag.com. Subscribe There's a new computer acronym you're going to start hearing a lot about: USB. He advocates for a universal serial bus that is a powerful, new way to connect peripherals to PCs. Here's the scoop: Until now, connecting printers and other gizmos to PCs meant inserting one or more specialized adapter cards into the computer's motherboard. These maps essentially move the information back and forth between the PC's CPU and the peripheral. But in most PCs, there is room only for a handful of such cards, which limits the number of devices that can be used at any given time. What's more, switching devices requires a fair amount of tinkering with software settings - even restarting your computer. With USB HELP, one computer can connect to 127 different devices at a time, all of them available for use at the same time. Instead of additional boards, you just plug the USB-compatible device into a single USB port on the back of your computer. Then, one by one, each device connects to the USB connector in front of it, in the so-called daisy chain. In theory, no software changes are required. USB ports have been built into new computers for months, but you may have only heard of them recently, due to two important developments. On the one hand, Microsoft has started delivering its Windows 98 operating system, which is ready for USB. Equally important, USB-compatible peripherals are just beginning to appear in stores. These peripherals range from laser and inkjet printers to digital cameras, modems, speakers and phone-related devices. Digital Persona came out with U.are.U, a USB-compatible device that recognizes people's fingerprints as a way to protect computers from unauthorized use. And Butterfly Communications has developed the Monarch Wireless PBX, a wireless private phone switch to connect to a USB-equipped PC - designed for small businesses that depend on more than one outgoing phone line. USB was created to move rich multimedia data, too, which means an even more compelling video conferencing experience. Meanwhile, Apple Computer is making USB news with its new iMac computer. By deploying USB, Apple has been able to reduce the cost of its hardware and allow its customers to use many peripherals designed for the IBM-compatible PC market. Apple is also expected to integrate USB ports into future models. So how much does this new technology cost? USB-ready peripherals are not expected to cost significantly more than previous models, especially as the technology becomes ubiquitous. Dataquest Market Research Predicts the number of USB-compatible PCs will soar to more than 151.8 million shipped in 2001 - a tidy 100 percent of all machines expected to be produced this year. John W. Venity is a writer based in Brooklyn, New York, who has covered the computer industry for 21 years. Send your computer questions to John over the phone And then there was DVD First came CD-ROM, storing mind-blowing 650MB of digital content - text, photos, software, sounds and even video footage - on a 5.25-inch drive. And now there's DVD-ROM, a sister product for new DVD video discs you may have seen at your local video store. With DVD-ROM discs now appearing as standard components in many PCs, the multimedia industry is asking itself a big question: Will DVD-ROM, offering 10 times more features, succeed where CD-ROM has failed? You'll remember the excitement of the early 90's about CD-ROMs as a new medium for delivering multimedia programming. Many companies have rushed to the market with quirky names - everything from encyclopedias to discs celebrating hip-rock bands describing exotic travel and providing interactive history lessons. Today's CD-ROM market, however, is a victim of an impossible economy. Between production costs and licensing of high-quality photos and videos, the production of entertainment CD-ROM can cost more than \$300,000. But few titles sell enough copies to earn back this kind of investment, so publishers have slashed budgets - and production values - and the market has collapsed. The DVD is worth doing better, but don't hold your breath. One big plus: A DVD-ROM drive can within hours broadcast quality video or thousands of clear, full-screen photos. And its coding process strongly protects this material from unauthorized copying - a big bugaboo for Hollywood studios and news organizations that have shied away from releasing their valuable properties in an unsafe CD-ROM format. But for now, there are no standard specifications for the minimum PC installation people should view DVDs. For the next year or so, about the only form of DVD interactivity you'll see it's a species found on 12-inch laser discs starting a few years ago - a set of photos still and perhaps a short trivia quiz attached to the end of a feature film. Even with millions of DVD-ROM discs expected to appear under the holiday trees this season, the DVD market is mostly about movies, said Blaine Graboyes, co-founder of zuma Digital New York, one of 125 DVD-produced firms in the United States. THE DVD ROM will evolve, but it will take years. Frequently asked questions: What should I look for in a computer monitor? A: Personal computer systems finally sell for less than \$1,000, but be careful: To get prices that low, manufacturers often cut corners on perhaps the most important component of all: the monitor. This is the main interface, so to speak, between you and your programs and documents. So if you are forced to work with your computer for long periods of time, you will do well to get the best screen you can afford. The alternative is not only a decline in productivity, but also a discomfort in the form of headaches, tired eyes and even constantly deteriorating vision. Screen size and resolution are the two main attributes to consider. Generally speaking, the larger the screen, the more details you can conveniently see and the more window windows program icons that you can view at the same time. Low-cost systems try to get away with 15- or even 14-inch monitors, but a unit of 17 inches or more is highly recommended. The 15-inch models currently cost about \$300; The 17-inch models start just below \$500 and cost as much as \$1,000, depending on their features. Go more than 17 inches and you are in the area of specialized graphics that most people don't need - and can't afford. Resolution is a more complex issue. This is determined by a combination of settings in the operating system and the physical attributes of the monitor. Most PCs can generate finely detailed full-screen images, but when used with a screen less than 17 inches, your text and icons will probably seem too small to be conveniently viewed. It is best to reduce the resolution to 800 x 600 points per inch (dpi), which is standard. Or, if you need items to seem even bigger, you can try the 640 x 480 dpi settings. Finally, here's your graphics card. Its total memory determines how many colors you can display at the same time and how quickly a computer can change images. 1MB graphics cards included with many low-end computers are probably good if you work mostly with text. For better graphics, you can upgrade to a 2MB or even an 8MB graphics card for \$150 or less. And don't forget, the correct location of the chair, keyboard and monitor is the key to convenient use of the computer. Happy viewing! 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