

Handy add-ons for enhancing mobile devices



By Michael Lasky on October 23, 2014 in [Best Hardware](#)

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Downsizing from a full desktop PC to a portable has its charms, but it can also impose some unexpected productivity compromises.

Here are three clever devices that fill the gaps in mobile hardware, plus a device for recording your life on the go.

Wireless keypad makes small keyboards complete

We all know that laptop PCs have their limitations. But when I gave up on a desktop PC in favor of a 13-inch portable, one compromise became obvious almost immediately: I really missed a dedicated numeric keypad. I soon discovered I use that keypad for quick data entry far more often than I'd thought. A laptop's smaller keyboard just isn't productive when doing heavy numeric entry into spreadsheets or databases.

Add-on keypads are common, but most are either wired or use a wireless USB connection. Unfortunately, like most laptops, my PC has only three USB ports — all of which are in use. (For adding more USB ports, see the review following this one.) NewerTech's Wireless Aluminum Keypad (U.S. \$49; [info](#)) solves that port problem by using Bluetooth to connect to personal computers.

The NewerTech keypad's aluminum housing and white keys are obviously designed to match Apple's wireless keyboard. But it works well with any brand of Bluetooth-equipped laptop, tablet, or phone. To add to your productivity, the keypad includes dedicated keys for page-up, page-down, home, end, tab/clear, delete-back, and delete-forward — plus three extra function keys.



Figure 1. NewerTech's Wireless Aluminum Keypad is a handy addition to notebook PCs.

The keypad design makes data input quick and accurate. The keys are well spaced and responsive, a slight tilt makes using the pad more comfortable, and grippy feet keep it from sliding on the desktop. I found Bluetooth pairing always quick. (Pairing was a significant problem with early Bluetooth devices but is much less so today.) The keypad is powered by two AA batteries that should last for ages.

Why not just attach a full-sized keyboard to the laptop? That's certainly an option, but I like having the flexibility of placing the keypad where it's more comfortable to use — something that left-handed PC users might appreciate.

A seven-port hub for all USB applications

It seems you can never have enough USB ports — or those you have are in an inconvenient place, as is often the case with desktops. Like many laptops, my Dell portable has just three USB ports. With an external keyboard and mouse, a printer, and a backup hard drive attached, all three ports are occupied. That leaves no convenient way to sync and/or charge my digital camera, smartphone, or tablet.

There are, of course, boatloads of USB hubs to choose from. However, most of those are restricted to USB 2.0 transfer speeds. The selection of USB 3.0 hubs is still somewhat limited.

VisionTek's Charge & Sync USB 3.0 Seven Port Hub (\$55; [info](#)) is one of the few hubs I've seen that are designed with today's varied USB applications in mind. It includes four USB 3.0 data ports plus three more that are dedicated charging ports. The two one-amp ports are ideal for recharging low-power devices such as phones; portable speakers; and small, mobile hard drives. The lone two-amp port is for high-power devices such as tablets and some larger, external, battery-powered hard drives. The ports are nicely labeled, so you can quickly attach each device to the correct port.

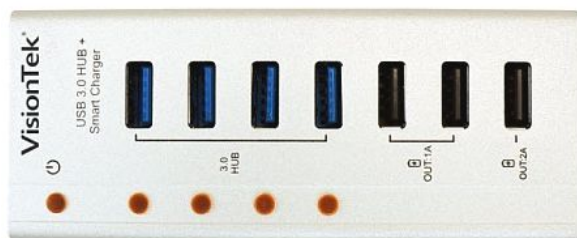


Figure 2. VisionTek's Charge and Sync Seven Port Hub includes dedicated ports for data transfers and device charging.

Weighing in at less than three ounces, the silver-anodized aluminum hub works well on the desktop and on the road. It can be plugged into AC for high-speed data transfers and high-power charging, or it can be connected to just a PC by its USB cable — in which case you still get high-speed data transfers, but device charging is limited to the four USB 3.0 ports. No drivers are needed for the hub; it's completely plug-and-play.

All four data ports are backward-compatible with USB 2.0, and LED indicator lights show which data ports are in use. At \$55, the Charge & Sync isn't the cheapest seven-port USB hub you can find, but it's uniquely convenient. The package includes a 39-inch USB 3.0 cable.

Wireless speaker — all sound, no fury

If the underside of your desk is anything like mine, you have a Gordian knot of wires; trying to match the right cable with the right device is infuriating. In this case, the solution is to simply eliminate cables wherever you can — sometimes in surprising ways. For example, add stereo computer speakers that need neither audio cable nor AC adapter.

There are now a zillion Bluetooth speakers on the market (and I've probably looked at half of them), all designed to stream music from portable devices such as cell phones and tablets. But with Bluetooth connectivity increasingly on both laptops and desktop PCs, why not apply the advantages of mobile technology to the desktop?

Boombotix's whimsically shaped, hexangular Boombot REX (\$60; [info](#)) is only 3.3 inches wide by 2.1 inches deep, so it takes up almost no space on my desk. But packed within that small box are two full-range speakers and a passive bass woofer that deliver surprising power (loudness). Playing music, the REX had clear, crisp treble and bass, and subdued midranges.

Designed primarily for connection to mobile devices, the REX includes a noise-canceling microphone for hands-free phone calls. On my PC, it worked equally well as a speakerphone for Skype calls.



Figure 3. The 3.3-inch Boombot REX delivers surprisingly powerful sound and doubles as a speakerphone (without the phone).

Four buttons on top of the speaker let you adjust volume, play or pause audio, change music tracks, and turn the speaker's power on or off. In my tests, Bluetooth pairing was nearly automatic. For those times you want music on the road, the REX has a soft-touch, ruggedized case and is water-resistant.

The REX comes in a variety of colors, and the kit includes a USB charging cable. (Now they need to perfect wireless recharging.) Recharge time is about an hour, and you get around eight hours of audio. Although I don't want yet another cable on or under my desk, an included three-foot auxiliary audio cable lets you connect REX directly to a PC or other device — or to a second REX for better stereo separation.

Boombotix has generously supplied me with an extra speaker to give away to the first reader who claims it by emailing his or her name and shipping address. Send your entry to windowssecretsgiveaway@gmail.com.

Dash camera records more than your drives

When I tested Cobra's CDR 900 Drive HD Dash Cam with Wi-Fi (\$250; [info](#)) and later viewed its video to my PC, I immediately recalled Mae West's legendary line, "Keep a diary, dearie, and someday it will keep you." That's quite true of the Dash Cam. As was made abundantly clear from the last big meteor strike over Russia, you have evidence of every event that occurs in front of your car — interesting or bad. Or you can just have a nice video diary of that epic road trip.

Cobra's two-inch-square Dash Cam is similar to those seemingly ubiquitous GoPro HD action cameras ([site](#)), but it's designed mostly for the car. It comes with a self-mounting pedestal, a USB cable, and a power adapter that plugs into a vehicle's 12-volt port (aka cigarette lighter). The camera's battery can also be recharged via a

PC's USB port.

The Dash Cam's lens covers 160 degrees without obvious edge distortion. You can record in a continuous loop or have recording triggered by motion detection. The camera supports up to Super HD (2304 by 1296 pixels) and 30 frames per second. There is, of course, a built-in microphone; mine was set to mute by default. Video is stored on a MicroSD card, with a maximum capacity of 64GB. (An 8GB card is included to get you started.)



Figure 4. Cobra's Dash Cam records your automotive journeys.

The camera can be used as a simple camcorder, but its built-in Wi-Fi lets you stream live or recorded footage directly to an iOS or Android device. An app also lets you remotely command the camera or even change its advanced settings. The camera has a USB 2.0 port (USB 3.0 would have been better) and a mini-HDMI connector for transferring videos and video playback. You can also insert the MicroSD card into your computer.

Fortunately, my road trips were uneventful. But the Dash Cam let me keep my eyes on the road and enjoy the scenery later. And if I had been involved in an accident, I might've had useful evidence for my insurance claim.

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