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OQO Model 02: The Biggest Little Computer Around

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BY CHRIS DANNEN 5 MINUTE READ

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It's called the Model 02, and it's made by San Francisco-based company called OQO. The company's mission: shrink a full-scale Windows PC down to pocket size, without sacrificing usability. I'll save you the suspense: they've done it right.

The Model 02 is a full-blown Vista Business Edition PC that comes in a variety of hardware [configurations](#). My test model was the top of the line: a power-sipping 1.6GHz VIA processor, 64GB solid state hard drive, 1GB of RAM, and a whole array of pretty terrific [accessories](#). The best extra is definitely the discrete, black [docking station](#), which has the potential to make the OQO a complete desktop replacement with its built-in DVD burner, HDMI and VGA interfaces, USB 2.0, ethernet and audio out. Models start at \$1300, but the pricetag on my model rung in at almost \$3200 without the \$600 accessory pack. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The 1-pound device itself is housed in a sturdy magnesium frame and sports a 5-inch screen, a 3- or 6-hour battery, and a pretty extensive little backlit keyboard with one of those little pencil-eraser tracksticks for mouse navigation. That might sound old-fashioned, but the OQO trackstick is actually a wonder of precision; the pencil-eraser has come a long way since its ubiquity a decade ago. Precision is also a hallmark of the keyboard, which has a solid feel and well-spaced keys. And while I was nerdily overjoyed to find a number pad and nice, big "enter" and "delete" keys, some of the keys are overburdened with two or three different functions that are somewhat dizzyingly associated with the shift, function, and control keys. (Witness the poor question mark, which shares a key with the forward slash and the wireless dashboard shortcut, oddly displaced to left of the spacebar.) You can also use a Wacom tablet pen for touch-screen input, though I was content with the trackstick and keyboard for most applications.

You might have chortled a bit when I mentioned this thing runs Vista Business Edition — I did too. But after speaking with Bob Rosin, SVP of Marketing at OQO, I can understand their rationale: Vista has much quicker wake-up time from its standby mode than does XP, and it has pretty advanced power management abilities to boot. With Aero and a lot of other superfluous junk turned off, it runs admirably on the Model 02 and rarely lags. Of course, OQO has baked in a lot of custom functionality to make Vista useful on such a particular device; the most salient example is their Wireless Dashboard, which allows you to quickly switch between WiFi, Bluetooth and integrated mobile broadband (which is an option, and works with Sprint or Verizon service plans). There are also zoom keys on the keyboard that allow you to, well, zoom in or out on whatever you're viewing on the OQO's screen, and a "rotate" function that turns the screen to display in vertical portrait mode. In such a high-end device, I would have expected a built-in accelerometer that could do this without necessitating a button-press, but I was quickly placated by the touch-sensitive scrollers on the sides of the screen. They had a tendency to be jerky at times, but it was nice to be able to manipulate the screen even a little bit without rummaging for a stylus.

So, granted, it's a cool gizmo. But after the initial oohs and aahs subsided, the Model 02 didn't immediately find its niche on my desk. There it sat, between my desktop PC, my laptop, and my iPhone, its role unclear. I stared at it. Not as handy for email as a smartphone, and more frustrating for word processing than a laptop. Where did the little guy fit?

As it turns out, it's not worth trying to wedge the Model 02 between your existing suite of gadgets, because it really works better as a replacement for all of them. It took me a week to figure this out, detaching my monitor from its tower, putting the laptop away and using the docking station to make the OQO both my desktop and on-the-road PC. When on the road, the iPhone still handled quick internet excursions, but when it came time to book a hotel room on the train, or write a long-winded email to my sister in Europe, out came the Model 02. Back in its docking station, the Model 02 left little to be desired from my other PCs; only when it came time to do some work in Adobe CS did I retreat to my Core 2 Duo laptop.

It's worth mentioning that the more specialized the application, the more useful the Model 02 has the potential to be. For the average person, who travels only occasionally and does most of their work from a desk, it's hard to justify a device like the Model 02 — especially considering its potentially astronomical cost. But for someone like, say, a journalist — typing up notes from the field or examining digital photos to make sure you got the shot before you head home — it can be invaluable. This isn't lost on OQO, which offers several [accessory packs](#) tailor-made for different professional applications. Logistics coordinators, technicians, field scientists and a littany of other workers will likely find the Model 02 a terrific little companion for their endeavors, especially considering its tablet interface and its ability to run any Vista-compatible software without caveats. Hopefully they'll work for organizations with deep pockets, because the OQO, in all its glory, ain't cheap. But when you compare it to other UMPCs that sport severely limited hardware and software functionality for only slightly less money, it's pretty clear that you get what you pay for.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I've written about innovation, design, and technology for Fast Company since 2007. I was the co-founding editor of FastCoLabs [More](#)
