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Home Office: PC Upgrades Are Now an Outside Job

Version 2.0 makes USB a great choice for easy hardware enhancements.

Steve Bass

From the January 2003 issue of PC World magazine

There's more to USB than easy printer, scanner, mouse, and keyboard hookups. How about upgrading the sound, hard drive, or optical drive on your PC without having to crack your PC's case and poke around its insides?

I always seem to need more storage, but I can't add another hard drive to my PC because it doesn't have any free bays. My workaround? An external USB adapter--a shell, really--that lets me connect a hard drive, CD-RW or DVD drive, or any other IDE device to my PC.

The \$65 [USB 2.0 Drive Kit](#) from ADS Technologies has its own AC power plug, on/off switch, and USB cable. Add \$80 for a cheap 80GB hard drive I found on PCWorld.com's Product Finder, and I've got a super and affordable way to add storage. The setup also provides the security and portability I need for backups. The kit is plug-and-play and hot-swappable--I just use the Add/Remove Hardware applet in Windows' Control Panel to unplug the device and remove the USB cable. No need to take the hard drive out of the Drive Kit shell.

You saw the catch, right? Unless you bought your PC recently, it probably doesn't support USB 2.0. To get the drive's fastest performance, you need to, uh, open the PC's case to install a USB 2.0 adapter. USB 1.1 reaches transmission speeds of 12 megabits per second, while USB 2.0 leaps to 480 mbps. For more on USB 2.0 (there's a big difference between the specs and the real-world throughput), read "[Upgrades: Right on the Money.](#)"

I added USB 2.0 to my old computer via Adaptec's \$74 DuoConnect PCI card, which has four USB 2.0 ports and three FireWire ports. It took about an hour and several reboots to install the card on my Windows 98 SE system, but only 10 minutes to install on a Windows XP machine.

FEBRUARY 24, 2003

PRODUCT INFO

[ADS Drive Kit](#)

[Extigy SB0130EX](#)

[ADS Instant DVD](#)

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Listen Up

I gave the ax to the cheapo sound card that came with my wife Judy's PC (it probably cost the vendor all of \$3). I replaced it with Creative's \$100 [Sound Blaster Extigy](#), which looks like a small stereo amplifier. I connected the Extigy to the PC's USB port, installed the drivers, rebooted, and was done. The Extigy automatically told the existing sound card that it was no longer the PC's audio device--I didn't need to manually disable anything.

The 5-minute Extigy upgrade gave the computer better sound *and* the audio ports Judy needs to plug in both a cassette recorder and headphones so she can listen to bird calls. I used the device to plug in a set of 5.1 speakers and to tickle the keys of a MIDI piano keyboard. The Extigy has optical, Sony/Philips Digital Interface (SPDIF), and digital connectors, as well as convenient line-in, microphone, and headphone ports, all in easy reach.

Speaking of reach, I soon got tired of crawling under my desk with a flashlight in my mouth every time I needed to swap USB devices. Now I plug them all into a USB hub--Belkin's 7-Port Hub (\$26) fits the bill nicely.

Lately I've been spending a lot of time futzing with a digital camcorder as I edit tons of digital and older analog video. I've been using ADS Technologies' \$150 [USB Instant DVD](#) external video capture unit. It imports from practically any source: a VCR, analog video recorder, digital camcorder (via an analog connector), or even a TiVo. Even though I could hook up my digital camera using FireWire, it's faster with the USB Instant DVD because the gizmo uses a hardware compression chip to recompress the digital video format into MPEG. The device is bundled with Ulead's VideoStudio and MyDVD software, apps that make it easy to fiddle with old videotapes and burn them onto CDs.

The downside to these external internals? I definitely need a bigger desk.

SUMMARY

[Creative Labs Sound Blaster Extigy](#)

★★★★☆

\$100

SUMMARY

[ADS Technologies USB 2.0 Drive Kit](#)

★★★★☆

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Contributing Editor Steve Bass runs the Pasadena IBM Users Group. Reach him at homeoffice@pcworld.com; visit here for more [Home Office](#) columns.

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