More Power to Go

Dr. Ted Selker, an IBM Fellow responsible for innovations such as
the Trackpoint III pointing device and the Butterfly keyboard, discusses
the current and future state of portable computing.

BYTE: With all these devices—hand-
helds, phones, notebooks—will we ever
get down to just having one device?
Selker: Well, I am working on a
mock-up that is based on the idea of a
wallet. It would have a clock, and it
could open in a tri-fold to be used as a
phone. There could be a display inside
that shows medical records and so on.
I like the idea of a wallet as a
metaphor. It is something that has all
the really valuable stuff you have to
have with you. You could even have a
built-in scanner that could handle
business cards and lots more. So I do
think we are starting to get into a position
where ultimately we can start
eliminating the problem of having too
many devices. But how can we make
them? That is really the question.

BYTE: Are we going to see drastically
smaller form factors in notebooks?
Selker: Well, small is great, but what
doesn’t work is changing the basic
QWERTY keyboard. Most people won’t
work with [non-QWERTY] keyboards.
So we are looking at all sorts of possible
designs, including a keyboard that clips
onto your belt and one you can wear on
your body.

BYTE: That sounds somewhat radical.
Selker: Well, it’s all about the social
situation, making the usage scenario fit.
For example, 50 years ago people had
all their focus at the desktop, and they
wrote using pens they dipped into an
inkwell. But then the ballpoint pen
arrived and let them write away from
the desk easily. Now, notebook
technology is small enough, but the
question is how to make the scenario fit
so that it doesn’t disturb the social
situation.

BYTE: What do you mean by that?
Selker: Well, with some of these pen-
based devices you pull one out and it is
30 seconds or a minute before anything
happens. People end up getting
distracted by the technology. That type of
thing will have to fall away. Maybe
we’ll end up with technologies on our
bodies, in our hands, or in our back-
packs, but we have to look at how not
to make it a big pile of things you need
to think about all the time.