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Served in Short Order

Hand-Held Computers Remove Some Legwork

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Ann Marie Diogo held a small, black computer as she quickly scribbled an order for a table of customers in the Royal Mile Pub in Wheaton.

Within moments, their order for fish and chips, a cheeseburger and two Cokes was back at the kitchen—without Diogo ever taking a step away from the table.

"It's a lot more convenient," said Diogo, 37, who lives in Sandy Spring and has been a waitress at the pub for five years. "Now it would be hard to move back to pen and paper."

The computer—essentially a hand-held organizer with specialized software—is one of the latest technologies being used by restaurant managers to quicken service. The Royal Mile Pub started using the system, which includes computers for the chef and hand-held devices for waiters, in May. It costs between \$20,000 and \$30,000.

Action Systems Inc., a computer software company in Silver Spring, designed Royal Mile Pub's system and has sold it to 14 other restaurants across the country. Typically, a waiter would take down a food order with pen and paper and walk to a computer at a waiter station and punch in the order to electronically send it back to

the kitchen.

Action System's paperless system not only speeds up the ordering process but lets chefs update the daily specials from their computer and beam it right to the hand-held device. No more writing the "catch of the day" on a chalkboard at the hostess stand.

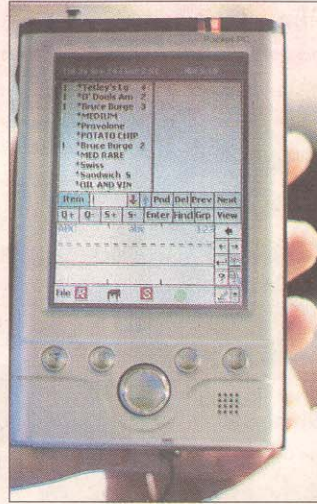
"It takes 10 seconds now to update the menus," said Ian Morrison, 28, who lives in Silver Spring and is the Royal Mile Pub's chef. He sat at his computer updating the daily special one recent afternoon, typing Smithfield Ham with an English cheddar sauce or cedar-plank salmon and mustard mashed potatoes. "It's that easy."

Action Systems Inc. (ASI) is a private firm that was founded in 1987, last year made \$2 million in revenues and made \$1.7 million in profit. Malison, who is an electrical engineer by training, said he and others thought of developing the hand-held device for restaurants to help them cut costs and save time.

"It prevents waiters from having to do double-entry," Malison said of writing down orders on paper, then putting them in the computer. "They can just do it by single-entry."

Restaurant owners and analysts said the technology will likely be used in more restaurants in the next few years as businesses try to improve their profit margins and service levels.

Although ASI isn't the only company making the software, it is one of the few, industry experts said, that has been able to improve the software and make it nearly



BY TOM ALLEN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Action Systems Inc.'s hand-held computer, left, is designed to help servers quickly take customers' meal orders, as waitress Ann Marie Diogo does at the Royal Mile Pub in Wheaton.

glitch-free. ASI said its hand-held computers can hold up to 2,000 items and recognizes a person's handwriting without the need to learn special writing techniques.

"The problem with them has been reliability," said Ron Paul, president of Technomics Inc., a Chicago-based consulting firm that follows restaurant trends. "It's like cell phones with dead spots."

Also, Paul said, some restaurant owners may find the hand-helds too expensive, compared with a paper pad and pencil. Details on orders can also be difficult to re-

cord. For example, he said, "telling the cook to make eggs over easy, the bacon crispy and hold the dressing on the side of a salad" is hard to write down in the small space of a hand-held device, even if it does have pop-up screens, as Action Systems' devices do.

The hand-held technology of companies like ASI does have benefits.

"It does allow you to keep the help on the floor and anything that can improve customer satisfaction, a restaurant owner will want to use."