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Handhelds Speed Up Restaurant Service

Ann Marie Diogo scribbled an order on the screen of a handheld computer at the Royal Mile Pub in Wheaton.

Within moments, the order for fish and chips, a cheeseburger and two Cokes was at the kitchen without Diogo having taken a step from the table.

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

The computer, essentially a handheld organizer with special software, is one of the latest technologies being used by restaurant managers to speed up service. The Royal Mile Pub started using the system, which includes computers for the chef and handheld devices for waiters, in May.

Action Systems Inc., a software company in Silver Spring, designed the system and has sold it to 14 other restaurants around the country. It costs \$20,000 to \$30,000.

The system not only speeds up the ordering process, it also lets a chef update daily specials and beam the information to the handheld devices.

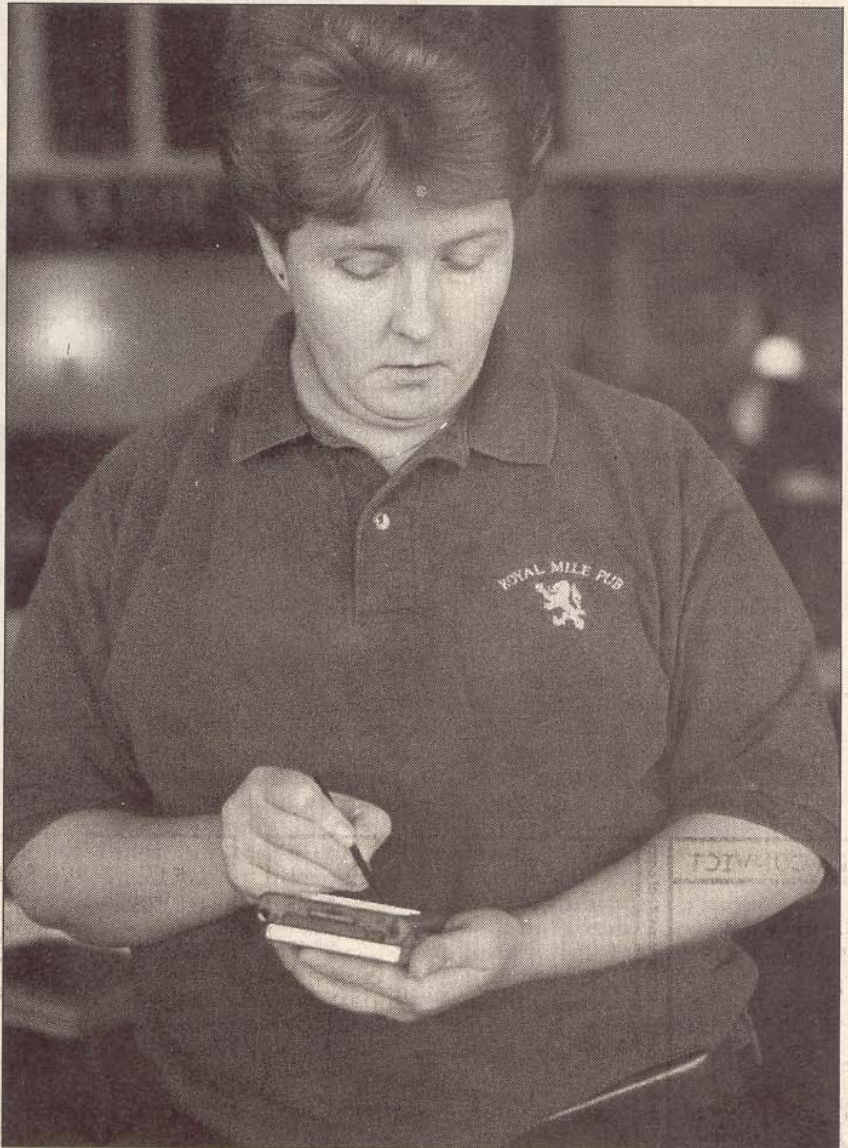
"It takes 10 seconds now to update the menus," said Ian Morrison, 28, who lives in Silver Spring and is the Royal Mile Pub's chef. "It's that easy."

Action Systems, a private firm founded in 1987, said it earned about \$136,000 on \$2 million in revenue. Action Systems President Alexander E. Malison, who is an electrical engineer by training, said he and others thought of developing the handheld device for restaurants to help them cut costs and save time.

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

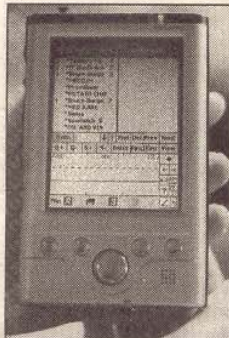
Although Action Systems is not the only company making such software, it is one of the few that has been able to improve the software and make it nearly glitch-free, industry experts said. Action Systems said its handheld computers can hold thousands of items and recognize handwriting without the staff having to learn special techniques.

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



PHOTOS BY TOM ALLEN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Ann Marie Diogo uses a handheld computer to send her customers' orders to the kitchen at the Royal Mile Pub. The device uses software from Action Systems Inc.



The ordering software recognizes handwriting.

Some restaurant owners may find the handhelds too expensive, compared with a paper, pad and pencil, Paul said. Details of orders can also be difficult to record. 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 in the small space of a handheld device, even if it does have pop-up screens, as Action Systems devices do.

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

—Dana Hedgpeth