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# A Superb USB Sound Card

with 2 Built-In Microphones

Keith Vincent

Getting a strong, clear audio recording on your notebook computer can be quite a challenge. Even if you do find a computer with a built-in microphone, you'll probably need to plug in an external mic to get a better recording. As for the quality of the sound cards that are built into our notebook computers, there's no telling what you'll get. I once had an IBM Thinkpad that had the best audio I've ever found in a computer. A few months later I bought the next model in the same series, and its audio was a huge disappointment.

Fortunately, you can plug in a small USB sound card to get around the limitations of the equipment that happens to be built into your computer. In fact, Martel Electronics includes such a USB sound card as part of its Digital USB Hi-Gain Mic. It will set you back $300, but you'll get a strong, clear recording. I've also tried a couple of Turtle Beach USB sound cards with built-in microphones -- in particular, the $40 Audio Advantage Amigo and the $80 stereo Audio Advantage SRM. The prices are reasonable, but you may pick up a bit of hiss along the way.

The best USB sound card that I've found is one that I bought recently from **Sound Professionals. At $199, their USB Ultra High Gain Stereo/Mono Mic is worth every penny.** It's also as small as a typical USB flash drive. That makes it much less obtrusive than a normal microphone, but it also means it will take less space in your equipment case.

Internal Mics

Headphone Jack

External Mic Jack

PowerDesk 7 Pro

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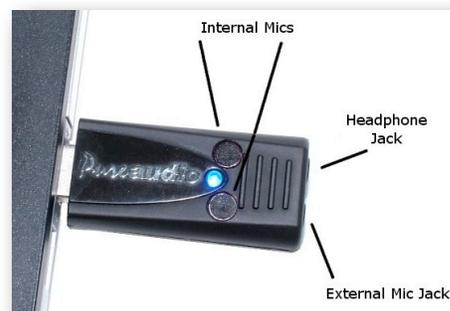
The best File Manager for over a decade, PowerDesk 7 Pro.

Using Windows Explorer as opposed to PowerDesk is such a waste of time when you can do things so much more efficiently. PowerDesk eliminates the need for separate programs to zip files, encrypt files, destroy files, synchronize folders and transfer files via FTP. (See reviews of previous versions of PowerDesk in our e-Tips archive.)

First, a little history, PowerDesk started off in the mid '80's as Xtree and after several name changes over the years morphed into PowerDesk. PowerDesk has been owned by a few companies during this time but has continuously been developed and upgraded. The latest version is PowerDesk 7 Pro which supports Windows XP and Windows Vista.

PowerDesk 7 Pro bills itself as, "The ultimate desktop enhancement utility for Windows, providing the power and features you need to get more work done in less time. PowerDesk comprises a group of utilities that will immediately increase your productivity in Windows." One of my favorite features is the Dual Pane Operation which makes it simple to drag and drop files between the different folders and drives on your computer. Personally, I can't get along without this feature alone!

With Archive Manager you no longer have to purchase separate programs like WinZip, et al., because PDP 7 does it all for you. You can even make "Self-extracting ZIP Files," if you like, plus, Password protect them. You can even place "Comments" inside the ZIP files. All you have to do is select Archive| Edit Comments, and that's it.
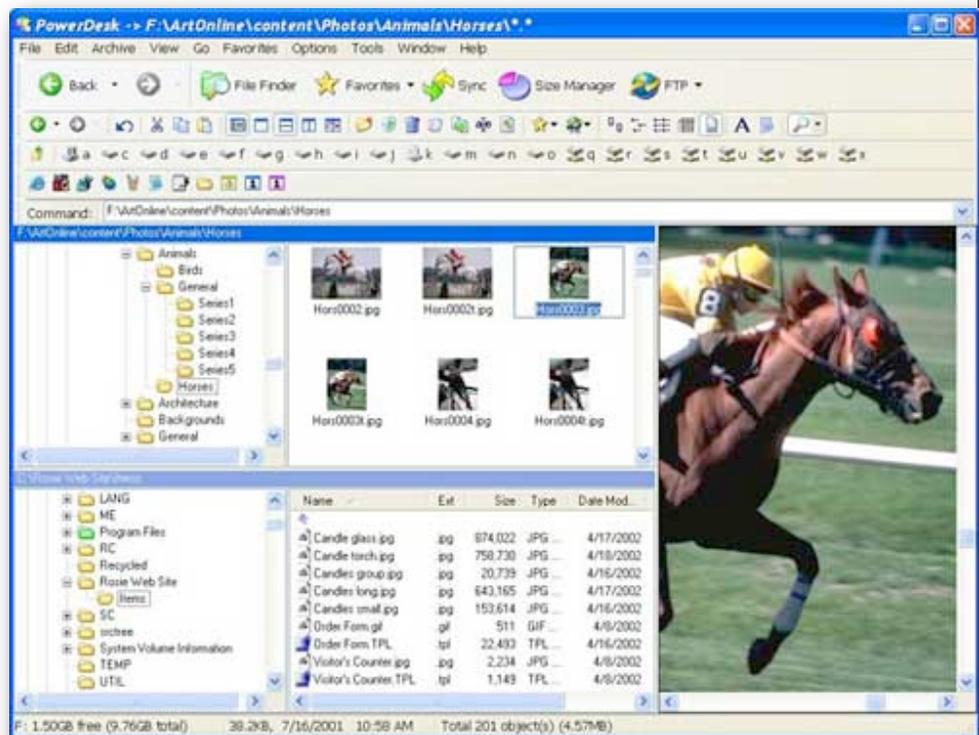
Great File Management

After using PowerDesk 7 Pro for just a few days, you'll be wondering how you've ever lived without it. Windows Explorer doesn't do a fraction of what PowerDesk 7 Pro will do. In summary, here's a "short list" of just a "few" of the Key Features unique to PowerDesk 7 Pro: Updated Interface, Folder Synchronizer, Size Manager, Easy FTP, Supports 32 different Compression Formats, Layout Manager, Skins to Change Appearance, Group file Rename, Configuration Import/Export, Keyboard Shortcut Manager, Viewer supports over 150 File Formats, Views and Converts over 31 different Graphic Formats, Advanced Instant File Find features, Playlist Editor, and so much more.

PowerDesk 7 Pro *(cont. from p. 2)*

PDP 7 is so handy, I could go on and on about this program. If you're skeptical of parting with $39.95 for a program you haven't even tried yet, as an alternative you may want to download xplorer2 which is also a highly regarded File Management program. You can find xplorer2 at: zabkat.com. xplorer2 also features the dual pane file browsing feature. You'll find PDP 7 at: avanquest.com. You owe yourself the experience of using the ultimate file management software, so whether you purchase PowerDesk Pro 7 or download the free version of Xplorer2, you'll soon discover the joys of exploring your computer without the hassle of Windows Explorer. These programs are what Windows Explorer should have been.

Manufacturer:
Avanquest Software Publishing.
7031 Koll Center Parkway Suite 150
Pleasanton, CA 94566, USA
www.avanquestusa.com
Ph: (925) 474-1700 - FAX: (925-474-1800

End User General Sales/Customer Service:
Hours: Mon. - Fri., 7:00 a.m. -5:00 p.m., PST, except holidays
Ph: (800) 395-6682
E-mail: salesadvice@avanquest.com

Minimum System Requirements: Pentium, or better PC
At least 32MB of RAM (64MB recommended and 40MB of free disk space)

Compatible with: Windows 2000, Windows XP, Windows XP Home, Windows XP Pro, Windows Vista Starter, Windows Vista Home Basic, Windows Vista Home Premium, Windows Vista Business, Windows Vista Enterprise, Windows Vista Ultimate, Windows Vista Home Basic x64, Windows Vista Home Premium x64, Windows Vista Business x64, Windows Vista Enterprise x64, Windows Vista Ultimate x64

PowerDesk 7 Professional can be purchased at Best Buy and other leading retail outlets across North America, and is also available online at avanquestusa.com
The upgrade is available for $19.95 at www.avanquest.com/USA/pc-tools/utilities/desktop-tools/PowerDesk_Pro_7.html?tr1=VC_US_EM_PD7_SUP_0323&cc=UPGPD7

Suggested Retail Price: $39.95. Right now there is a 35% Thanksgiving sale. Just enter promo code save35 when purchasing for download from the Avanquest Store online.

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Please use this order form to take advantage of sale prices (ends December 31, 2008).

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Shipping & Handling, $5 per disk	
(Outside USA, add additional $10)	_____
California residents, add 8.25% sales tax	_____
Total: (Checks only, please!)	_____
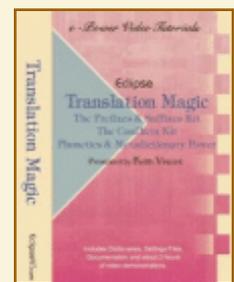
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For more info on e-Power Tutorials, visit: www.KVincent.com.

A Superb USB Sound Card *(cont. from p. 1)*

The folks at Sound Professionals have basically taken the latest USB sound card from Andrea Electronics and tweaked it to meet the needs of court reporters. Many reporters have been very happy with the Andrea sound pod and the Ultra Ear USB sound card. These are excellent products, but the USB sound card that I'm describing here is even more advanced.

So how did Sound Professionals tweak the Andrea USB sound card? First, **they've built in two microphones, but you can also plug in an external mic**, and its signal will be blended with the input from the internal microphones. (There's also another model that does not have built-in mics, for use with mics that you already own.) The sound card easily adapts to either stereo or mono recording.

Also, **if you plug in earphones, you'll hear what the mics are picking up**, which is very helpful when you're trying to listen to soft-spoken witnesses.

What most impressed me was the clarity of the recording that I was able to get. No hiss, no muddy sound. Clear as can be.

Before you plug in this sound card, be sure to run its installer. This is a file that's on a mini-CD disk, but you can also download it from the Andrea Electronics website. The sound card works in Windows XP, Windows Vista, and Mac environments.

After you've run the installer and plugged in the USB sound card, your computer should automatically detect the device and be ready to use it for recording. You can adjust your recording volume just as you would adjust any other microphone. However, you should also look for a new **"Andrea Audio Commander"** icon on your Windows Taskbar, close to the usual loudspeaker icon.

Right-click on the Andrea Audio Commander icon to open a small context menu. Then select **"Noise Cancellation." This is where you find "Microphone Boost."** When I first plugged in the sound card, the Microphone Boost was set at 0 dB. The sound was very clear, but not a lot stronger than what I was used to getting. You can add as much as 30 decibels of microphone boost, without losing clarity. When you take advantage of Microphone Boost, the difference is astounding.

Since the holidays were approaching and I was in a shopping mood, I went ahead and added an external mic from Sound Professionals that is matched to the two mics that are built into the USB sound card. The mic includes a daisy-chain jack so that an additional unit can be plugged into it. That would make four mics that would feed into the USB sound card, which should help when I'm reporting an arbitration in a large room.

Rear view showing optional daisy-chain jack

I ordered this microphone with a 30-foot cord, and that brought the price to about $100, but you can order the length of cord that you need. The mic itself starts at about $60, and the folks at Sound Professionals will be happy to guide you in selecting the options that will meet your needs.

If you'd like more information on these products, I've included a link on the e-Tips page of my website, www.KVincent.com.