

PERSONAL TECH

This article is more than **1 year old**

Nokia 9210 Communicator – any good?

Part 3

 [Andrew Orlowski](#)

Tue 14 Aug 2001 // 13:16 UTC

REG SMARTPHONE ROUNDUP The BOFH wonderphone, the much anticipated first Symbian open phone, has got off to a very shaky start. We've been using the 9210 for several weeks now and have to conclude that users should hold off for future revisions - although the interest piqued by this spectacular communicator (and the vast marketing campaign that goes with it) is in part justified.

It isn't the bugs - and we've experienced the worst of these that in our case necessitated returning the model - or performance, which is just about adequate, or even the lack of the must-have features du jour: GPRS and Bluetooth.

It's much simpler than that: the Nokia 9210 is simply underendowed in the RAM department. 4MB is insufficient to maintain more than two applications at once. Sometimes, it isn't even enough to maintain more than one as even in the most frugal conditions mail messages can fail to open during a web browsing session. Since the Symbian OS doesn't allow you to create a swap file - memory can't be paged to the memory card, which would be horribly slow in any case - there's no workaround.

So while bugs can be fixed by firmware upgrades, the memory shortfall is a permanent limitation. Users should hold off buying the current 9210 until it's superseded by a model with more than 4MB of RAM. At least that puts it in good company: both the original IBM PC and Apple's first Macintosh were historic machines, and each shipped with insufficient memory (64KB and 128KB) prompting revisions to be launched (640KB and 512KB, respectively).

Now the 9210 actually ships with 8MB of RAM. The problem is that you're actually left with a fraction of that for running applications. To show a simple 45k image captured by the accompanying digital camera, alongside an email requires shutting down some of the built-in

applications. This can be achieved using third-party utilities, but you have to ask yourself, why is such a capable device so handicapped?

That said, the 9210 is an awesome achievement - far surpassing current PDAs in communication facilities, and compatibility with Office apps. True, it doesn't play MP3s, which we don't miss at all, but it trumps rival PDAs (even CE PDAs) with its ability to view and edit office file formats. The much vaunted colour screen didn't disappoint and even with the noisy hype, the 9210 reserved some quite unexpected features with which to surprise us.

For example the speakerphone is so powerful that this rapidly became our preferred way of taking and making calls - leaving our hands free to take notes on the device as we talked. If you're coy about having your conversation broadcast, you shouldn't be. An audible two-way conversation is far less disruptive to the immediate social fabric than the one-sided "HI! YES! I'M ON THE ... YOU DID WHAT?" monologue that causes so much mobile phone rage.

As a regular phone, it's splendid, although it takes some getting used to listening to the back of the device, rather than the front.

Above all, as we discovered with our review of Motorola's Accompli 008 - a relatively modest communicator - the advantages of simply having one box for both phone calls and personal data management and access far outweighs the frustrations and shortcomings of the device.

Bugs

Nokia 9210 users have reported a number of bugs - and the first model we tried exhibited the most shocking of these. The phone would crash between cells, and couldn't subsequently be rebooted without a mains charge. It's a very curious bug: the battery didn't discharge at all, and the machine only required a second's worth of mains charge to awake. The problem is fixed in the latest revision 3.54, the model currently in the channel, but if you bought one of the earlier models Nokia will provide a free firmware update with a four day turnaround.

There were a number of other gotchas: the Calendar would go into fits of blinking, and fail to synchronise entries correctly. Others are manifest in the PC synchronisation, which on the whole proved more reliable than its predecessor the PsiWin suite. Users should not install the version 1.00 of the PC Suite on the accompanying CD. That's plain bust. (We used the version

2.0 of the software downloaded from the Nokia website). And needless to say, PC Suite is a Windows-only app, with Mac and Linux users effectively stranded.

However, we discovered that we couldn't restore the contacts info we'd archived from the first device onto the second. Why? Because the PC Suite software advised us that it was impossible unless we renamed the second device profile to match the first. Then when we did just that, it told us that the device name had been taken, and couldn't be reclaimed. It was only through an ugly hack (placing the old contacts.cdb file into the System/Data directory on the flash card, then manually deleting the contents of the new and empty contacts file on the replacement device, and copying the files from the old to the new contacts database) that we finally retrieved our data.

Pluses

Ah, but the pluses. The principal one is the messaging suite, which is truly a wonder to behold. Although previous Symbian OSes showed a tight integration between the contacts book and the messaging app, in the Nokia 9210 this is taken a stage further, and it really pays dividends.

The Nokia handles SMS, email and fax messages seamlessly, and is smart enough to send each message type to the correct destination. To our astonishment (maybe we're getting cynical) the PCMail feature - worked flawlessly. This allows you to work offline, then sync and send mails from your PC. Again we rued the low bandwidth serial connection - our mail file runs into many megabytes - but it got there in the end.

There's room for improvement in the Telephone app, particular with respect to call diverts, which should be easier to manipulate, and by being able to add new contacts from the Telephone app itself.

Can I replace my Psion with a 9210?

Psion users will discover that's there a lot missing from their favourite PDA. And it's not just a case of lost screen real estate or a decent keyboard. The 9210 is much narrower than even a Series 3: five and half against nine centimetres, which makes touch typing impossible. Of course, there's a corresponding loss of screen space too: in a comparison at [SmartphoneUser](#) magazine, the 9210 is reckoned to have 31.5 square centimetres of usable screen, compared to 42 for the Revo and 39 for Compaq's bulky iPaq.

Nokia has chosen not to implement some features of the Symbian ER6 platform, despite it being the evolutionary advance on the ER5 used in Psion's Series 5MX. Psion users will miss much, with chunks of dependable functionality missing from the familiar apps.

The Clock app seems to have copped the worst. While successive generations of Psions have sold themselves on their alarm functionality, the Nokia clock app has been disembowelled. In our initial review we couldn't find a way to change the default alarm sound: a dull chime. We goofed: as many of you have pointed out, it's actually configurable from the Profiles tool, as is the ability to turn off the keypad tones.

This Profiles tools that we overlooked is a powerful beast indeed. You can change your keyboard tones to suit any given profile (eg, General, Outdoors, Meeting) and ringtones, calendar chimes too. Which is splendid, but rather forbidding the novice. What we were looking for and failed to find was an access point, and we hope that the control panel has lures users towards this tool. At the end of the day, they're simply different views on the same set of configuration data.

A more fundamental problem for Psion veterans looking for an upgrade is that the data can't simply be copied over, even though the file formats are unchanged. ER6 employs Unicode, and the 9210 can't read the files. There's no ER5 to ER6 converter, although hopefully one will appear soon. For now, conversion to Word or another supported PC format is recommended, but since The Nokia PC Suite is incompatible with an existing installation of PsiWin, you'll probably want to run a dual boot setup with parallel versions of Windows until this can be completed.

Other eccentricities in the Nokia 9210 - and there are many - can charitably be explained by the need for backward compatibility. The 9210 is Nokia's third generation clamshell communicator, and Nokia has a small but significant number of business users who've grown familiar with it over five years.

For us, that doesn't explain the counter intuitive task menu, which is used to close running applications, or why the File Manager is in the Office group. Or why the main configuration centre - the Control Panel - is in the Extras, implying it's some kind of optional add-on. Or for that matter, why there are arbitrary program groups (Extras, Internet and Office) which can be opened but can't be closed, and which don't appear in the task list.

We've since discovered that you can add applications to these groups. Or more precisely, add applications from the Extras group into the Desk, Office or Internet groups. (File/Move to... option in the Extras group. Serendipity follows)

The File Manager is particular sticky to use. It conceptually uses the same UI behaviour as the contacts and messaging apps, with the focus shifting subtly between panes, a kind of gentle parachute-assisted drill down into your data, but the metaphor doesn't apply in this case. File Managers should behave like file managers, and we found ourselves pining for a replacement. Since the memory handicap means users will spend more time than they need to time shifting applications between the communicator and the memory card, any housekeeping quickly becomes a chore annoying.

Omission statement

The 9210 has taken some stick for its lack of Bluetooth and GPRS functionality. In practice, with GPRS being a limited (WAP only) and prohibitively expensive service for most of us, that's not missed. Far more limiting in practice was the lack of a USB connection; only infra red - a rarity on most notebook PCs these days - and a serial connection are supported. Given that the 9210 makes an excellent viewer for bulky PDF and PowerPoint files, this is absurd. It makes using PCMail on anything but the smallest mail file tedious.

Unlike previous 9000 series communicators, the 9210 doesn't come with a built-in Telnet. This accounted for its niche popularity with sysadmins, and it's a curious omission. There are a couple of alternatives. For non-secure Telnet, we've been using Russ Spooner's RatTerm, which is coming along in leaps and bounds. But ssh connections now can be made using the MindTerm Java ssh client, and should soon be available natively from openssh soon.

The US version of this phone, the 9290, should be available early next year. Hopefully Nokia will have raised the amount of memory which prevents this fairly wonderful device from fulfilling its potential. ®

Next: [The Verdict](#)

Other Stories in our Smartphone Roundup

[Review: Motorola Accompli 008](#)

[Review: Mitsubishi Trium Mondo](#)

Preview: Stinger