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Neonode Airbar first impressions: This clever accessory adds touchscreen functionality to any non-touch laptop

Ritesh Bendre

Thanks to Airbar, you can now add touchscreen functionality to your non-touch Windows 10 and MacBook Air laptops.

Every day, a lot of us spend a good amount of time using the touchscreen on our smartphones, but the same touch experience is often missing when it comes to laptops. Yes, there are touch-enabled laptops in the market, but you need to splurge more to have that feature included in your device. One company, Neonode, disagrees. The company that develops and licenses optical touch solutions to brands like Sony, Volvo and Amazon among others, has come up with a clever accessory - Airbar - that adds touchscreen functionality to any laptop.

I, for once, use a MacBook Air for work, and a gaming Windows 10 laptop at home, and both lack the touchscreen feature. In case of Windows 10, you at least have touch-enabled laptops, but Apple's MacBook range is far from seeing a full touchscreen anytime soon. In fact, the MacBook Pro with TouchBar is the closest Apple came to offering touch as a feature on the MacBook. But things change with Neonode's Airbar.

I recently had a chance to sit down with Airbar's SVP Remo Behdasht who offered us a quick demonstration of the product, the technology and how it works. The Airbar is compatible with 13.3-inch MacBook Air, and Windows 10 laptops with 14-inch and 15.6-inch displays. This means, even an entry-level Windows 10 laptop under Rs 30,000 can also be touch enabled. The Airbar is priced a little under Rs 7,000 and can be purchased from Amazon India.

As Windows 10 OS comes with built-in touch, you simply need to plug the Airbar onto the USB port of your laptop, and you're good to go. However, as macOS doesn't support touchscreens, you need a specially developed software to add touch feature to your MacBook Air.

While typical capacitive touchscreens measure conductivity from your fingers on the display, the Airbar uses infrared light which is projected on the front of the screen. The light field in space above the display tracks your finger movements to recognize touch and gestures.

The top surface of the Airbar is made from aluminum whereas the base is made from plastic. It comes with adhesive magnets that you need to affix on the bezel below the display. For best results, you must ensure that the Airbar is placed perfectly so the infrared sensor covers the entire screen area. For your assistance, there are two printed lines that should perfectly align with the outer edge of the screen.

Now, talking about the experience, the Airbar almost accurately tracks your finger movements and works as expected. When using an internet browser like Safari, Google Chrome, Opera or Microsoft Edge, you can touch on links to open the page, swipe to scroll and perform gestures like pinch to zoom in and zoom out. As Airbar uses infrared technology to sense motion, it also works if you're wearing gloves or paint brush.

I tried to doodle something on MS Paint on a Windows 10 laptop using the fingers, and the touch functionality works as expected. On the internet browser, I even tried pinch to zoom in and out by opening Google Maps, and while it worked well, there was a minor one-second delay. With Airbar, you can even touch those small icons to minimize, maximize and close the window. It is not flawless as the icons are small, but it works. The experience is similar on MacBook Air too.

Now, it's just been a couple of days since I'm using the Airbar on my MacBook Air and Windows 10 laptop. Is it practical to add an Airbar for touch functionality, or will be viable to spend some more and get a laptop with built-in touch functionality? We will answer all these questions in our detailed review of the Airbar, till then, stay tuned.

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