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Retractable devices help cut down on cable clutter

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Cables, cables everywhere, and what a twisted mess - in the laptop bag, that is.

If you travel for business - or are a mobile worker - and have to carry a laptop and cell phone, the cable clutter and challenges of connecting and charging everything can definitely be headache material. There are various shapes and sizes of cables, connectors and plugs, and each device generally requires its own unique set.

If you're on the road and run into a delay, reaching your hotel late in the evening, everything still needs to be charged for the next day. Oh what fun it is to sort all the cables out and get everything connected so it can charge.

Until recently, we were relative prisoners of this device portability dilemma, along with a significantly heavier bag to carry all the stuff. Few decent detangling solutions existed.

Enter Zip-Linq, a clutter solution that offers thin cables that wrap neatly around a retractable spool when not in use. To expand the cable, you pull evenly from each end. To retract, you gently pull and release, and the cables go back into hiding.

Zip-Linq adds various components to the cables to support popular devices such as cell phones, laptops, personal digital assistants and digital cameras. Not unlike Lego pieces, these components are small, lightweight and designed to fit together easily.

On a recent travel weekend, I took several Zip-Linq products for a test drive. With the cell phone charger, I was able to easily recharge my battery through my laptop's USB port. I connected the phone to the Zip-Linq cable using the supplied compatible jack, plugged the USB connector into the DC adapter, and plugged the DC adapter into my laptop.

Once my laptop was connected to a wall outlet and turned on, the cell phone started charging. Total charge time was around one hour, and my phone performed as usual afterward. As long as I have to carry a laptop anyway, the bulkier old cell phone charger unit that came with my phone is history.

I also tried out a Zip-Linq optical mini USB mouse. A small connector plugs into the mouse, and on the other end of the retractable cable, a USB connector plugs into the laptop.

The mouse fit comfortably in my hand and eliminated the usual fight my mouse cable has with the airplane tray table. I happened to drop the mouse off the side of the tray table, and discovered that I could tether it back up by partially retracting the cables. With the diminished size of most airplane seats, this avoids moving the laptop, returning the tray table to its upright and locked position, fishing for the mouse and starting all over again.

A Zip-Linq cell phone earbud speaker with a universal jack plugged into a colleague's Sanyo phone, so we took it for a couple of conversation test drives during a tabletop experiment. Audio quality was acceptable, and of course the retracting cable sold my colleague, who also wants to get rid of cable clutter. In addition to the standard universal jack, some proprietary earbud jack models are available; check your cell phone make and model to be sure you select the correct jack style.

Let's see. Fewer devices to fool with, a neater and lighter laptop bag and less time spent connecting all these devices before charging or using them. Cool.

Webb is a free-lance writer in Shaker Heights.

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