



More than just a home network



Paul Taylor

Personal technology

The extra features on Iomega's new storage device add several new media functions as well as general flexibility

Some personal technology devices are deceptively simple and yet solve real issues facing ordinary consumers quickly and easily. Iomega's iConnect Wireless Data Station is just such a gadget. It provides a simple way to make anything stored on USB storage devices – such as hard disk drives or flash memory sticks – available on a home network, allowing users to share content and access their files anywhere, even over the internet.

To look at, the iConnect is a nondescript black plastic box with rounded edges and three USB sockets on the front next to a single button with a double-headed arrow. There is a fourth USB port on the back together with a gigabit network cable port.

The USB sockets are the first clue to one of the iConnect's main functions – to provide centralised access to any storage device plugged into any of the iConnect's four USB ports. Photos, video, music and other digital content stored on these devices is then available to any PCs – Windows or Mac-based – that are connected to the same network using either an ethernet cable or via a Wi-Fi connection.

To start using the iConnect, you plug it into the mains, connect it your home router using either its wired or

wireless connection and load Iomega's Storage Manager software on to a networked PC. The iConnect itself runs a version of the open-source Linux operating system and a suite of applications designed to work with Windows, Mac and Linux-based PCs.

I tested the \$100 (£55 in the UK) iConnect with various USB storage devices, including Iomega's 500Gb eGo BlackBelt portable hard drive and several flash memory sticks of different capacities. I also plugged in a USB printer and had instant access to the Hewlett-Packard inkjet printer from any of my network-connected PCs round the house. You can plug up to two USB printers into the iConnect.

The Iomega iConnect is not the first device to make it easy to access USB storage devices over a home network: I have also been testing the latest version of CloudEngine's PogoPlug and a matchbox-sized, lime-green device from Ipevo, the Mini Network Storage Adapter.

Like the iConnect, the slightly more expensive PogoPlug has four USB ports and is an easy way to access any of your files and media at home from any laptop or desktop computer at home, or from a browser anywhere in the world. It also makes it easy to share this content directly with others – without having to upload it to a web-based service. However, unlike the iConnect, CloudEngine has developed an iPhone application to provide remote access for users to their files from an iPhone.

Ipevo's PC, Mac and Linux-compatible \$60 Mini Network Storage Adapter makes it easy to add a USB external hard drive to a local area network in order to store and share files – but it has just one USB port. It also supports playing multimedia con-

tent from a USB drive to a Microsoft Xbox 360, Sony PlayStation 3 or iTunes media player and, like the iConnect, enables users to download large video files from the web (using the BitTorrent protocol).

The iConnect does more or less what the PogoPlug and Ipevo does, and then has some other tricks up its electronic sleeve. One obvious advantage over both the others is the inclu-

sion of Wi-Fi access, which means you have the choice of wired or wireless connectivity.

The iConnect also has built-in support for both the increasingly common DLNA (Digital Living Network Alliance) and iTunes server standards. They enable the iConnect to show or play photos, audio and video to a range of media devices including game consoles such as Microsoft's 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3, iTunes players, digital picture frames and other multimedia devices. Everyone on the network can look at content on these devices without involving a PC.

Meanwhile, the iConnect's button with the double-headed arrow provides access to another useful and flexible feature. It is a "quick transfer" button that can automatically move data from a newly inserted USB drive either to another drive or to any other storage device connected to the network – a process called creating a copy job. It means that content is accessible to other connected devices only moments after inserting a USB drive, even after the stick is removed. One popular use for this may be as a

way to back up photos on a memory stick quickly and easily to a larger drive that is not so easy to mislay.

Alternatively, you can set it up to



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transfer data in the other direction – for example, to make a copy of a documents folder on a network-connected PC and move it to a secure memory stick. In this way, a document – a spreadsheet or a playlist – could be worked on from several devices around a household, with the final, most up-to-date version ready to be saved on to, say, a memory stick.

Omega's Storage Manager software is straightforward and is used to access most of the iConnect's settings, including its Picture Transfer Protocol, which allows pictures to be loaded automatically on to a USB storage device attached to the iConnect

simply by plugging in the USB cable of a compatible camera – again, without involving a computer. You can choose to delete the pictures from your camera automatically once they have been copied to the iConnect.

Omega also includes its Protection Suite of software, including simple scheduled file back-up and a choice of ways to achieve more comprehensive back-up protection. Apple users can easily back up any Mac computers running OS X (10.5 or later).

Overall, the iConnect is a powerful and inexpensive device that provides a simple way to bring all your USB storage into your network. More than that, it is packed with extra features that help it stand out from its rivals.

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The competition



CloudEngine PogoPlug

Pros: Easy way to turn USB drives into network and internet-accessible devices. Simple to set up and use.
Cons: Lacks some of the iConnect's features and costs more.



Ipevo Mini Network Storage Adapter

Pros: Low-cost way to network-enable a single USB storage device.
Cons: Lacks some of the iConnect's features.



The verdict



Iomega iConnect Wireless Data Station

Pros: Low-cost network device that turns any USB drive into network-attached storage and adds many other useful features.

Cons: None.



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