



HP Compaq nc6400 Review (pics, specs)

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HP Compaq nc6400 Review

by *Ela Kotkowska*

This is a review of [HP Compaq nc6400](#), a thin-and-light 14.1" widescreen notebook in the [business](#) line. Its light-weight and features match those of a comparable [ThinkPad Z61t](#).



HP nc6400 business laptop ([view large image](#))

The specifications for nc6400 (pre-configured model RA260AT):

- operating system: Windows XP Professional
- processor: Dual core T2300E (1.66GHZ)
- graphics: Intel Graphics Media Accelerator 950
- screen: 14.1-inch WXGA (1280 x 800 resolution)
- hard drive: 80 GB (5400 rpm)
- memory: 1GB 533MHz DDR2 SDRAM (2 DIMM)
- optical drive: DVD+/-RW DL (Matsuhita)

The [notebook](#) has 3 USB ports, integrated smart card reader, SD media slot, integrated Bluetooth, integrated microphone, presentation button, ambient light sensor, wireless off/on button, and fingerprint sensor.

Reasons for buying:

While I am becoming increasingly mobile, my old Dell Inspiron 1100 has become too heavy to carry around. I needed a [computer](#) that would perform well in multitasking, have decent storage, possibility of DVD backup. After some tedious research, I bought a ThinkPad Z60t, shortly before

the Z61t with dual core processor came out. One feature that I found useful on ThinkPad in comparison with the HP, was its rather painless System Migration Assistant: on the HP, I ended up doing everything manually. I returned the ThinkPad because the wireless did not work properly, and I decided I could not put up with the loudness of its keyboard. Then, I bought a Dell e1405, only to return it the next day. After handling a ThinkPad, I was very disappointed with the poor quality of the new Dell design: its fragile plastic was a sign of regression from the older models. It also turned out that the sound card installed on the Dell did not allow for recording through Stereo Mix, but only through the microphone, i.e. with all the noises of typing, talking, etc. And, as I spoke about it to the customer service, it also turned out that \$200 invested in a 4 year warranty did not buy me any technical support: I would have had to pay additional \$200 to add that on! All HP business models, on the other hand, come with 3-year international support.

Finally, what swayed my decision in favor of nc6400 were the following features:

quality of components:

matte screen (seems brighter than the ThinkPad, definitely brighter than Inspiron 1100)

solid, yet quiet keyboard

dual pointing devices (touch pad & pointing stick)

performance:

dual core processor

aesthetics:

light-weight (4.6 lb, just like Z60t, compared to 5.3 lb for e1405 or Toshiba's Tecra A6)

solid built, magnesium alloy casing (not aluminum, like Tecra A6, or cheap plastic like Dell)

plain-looking, with no flashing buttons (like HP's mainstream models)

Where and how purchased:

I bought it [directly from HP](#) over the phone. I did it mostly for the ease of possible return. I paid \$1399 + \$45 tax. It was shipped from Indiana, and arrived the next day with \$16 shipping.

Build and design



HP nc6400 view with the closed lid ([view large image](#))

The HP nc6400 has the sturdy feel of a ThinkPad. There is no flex to the keyboard; the hinges on the lid are strong. I haven't carried it around much, yet, and am not sure if it gets scratched easily, but it doesn't give that impression. The ports are conveniently located, and the location of headphone and microphone jacks marked on the top with small off-white icons. I guess due to the size of the [laptop](#), there was no room for indicating the location of the USB ports, etc. The entire surface of the computer seems framed inside a thin trim that protects the ports, optical drive, and speakers from direct impact, should one accidentally bump into something while moving the laptop around. The screen is kept from brushing against the keyboard by little rubber bumpers placed around the screen and two at the bottom of the keyboard.

Screen

The 14.1" widescreen, thanks to its aspect, seems to give more working space than a 15" diagonal display. The screen is very crisp and bright. Unlike most consumer-oriented [laptops](#) these days, HP offers a nice matte screen. It seems brighter than the ThinkPad Z60t I used and brighter and crisper than my old Inspiron 1100. And, something I have now come to appreciate, since it's not glossy and reflective you don't have to see your haywire hairdo after you've been writing a paper for fourteen hours straight!

I think the WGA+ resolution would have made things too small to read, so I opted for the regular 1280x800 display.

There are no dead pixels, no light leakage. As an option, you can add a removable privacy filter preventing your neighbor on the plane from peeking into your work.

Speakers



The speakers are located on the front of the computer, but both on the right-hand side which, despite their quality, creates a slight asymmetry in the sound. At first, I thought that it was a mono speaker (as on Dell D620, for instance). This can probably serve as a general warning: the speakers are usually much smaller than they look (see ThinkPad, where the speaker occupies a third of the speaker mesh extending on both sides of the keyboard).

On the other hand, compared to the ThinkPad, where only the driver reinstallation assured me that the speakers actually exist, but are, for most purposes, useless, you can actually set the volume on HP nc6400 where it is too loud! And at no point did I get to a strained screech, as I do on the Dell which does not tolerate high tones.

Processor and performance:

I evaluate the performance mostly on the basis of multitasking, since I don't use the computer to play games. I don't have the utility software to run the benchmark performance tests, but here's what I was running simultaneously and the machine didn't even stutter:

- downloading the contents of my old HD through ftp
- downloading over a thousand emails from the server
- several windows of Firefox opened
- downloading the contents of my iPod
- transferring some other files using USB removable storage device

listening to music
writing two MS Word files
running a dictionary

Heat and noise

Overheating computer can be a cause of malfunctioning of many components. With my Dell, for instance, the cooling vents are ingeniously placed on the bottom. The vents on the HP nc6400 are on the left-hand side. You can feel a flow of warm air coming out, and it's a good sign: the rest of the computer remains cool. No discomfort caused by a flaming keyboard or toasty plastic under your wrists. The only time I've actually found the machine rather warm, was the day it arrived, after being handled by the UPS in over hundred-degree heat.

As to noise, you hear only a slight whisper of the fans. While the Dell heaved as an asthmatic whale, the nc6400 is quiet as a dormouse.

Keyboard and Touchpad



[\(view large image\)](#)

To someone who types most of the day, a good keyboard is a must. And I am very happy with this one. The HP nc6400 has a full-size keyboard and a nice layout, with *home*, *pg up*, *pg dn*, *end* keys offset to the left by a narrow divider, and the arrow keys slightly lower than the other keys. The *fn* key is full size, although not extra-wide as it is on the Inspiron 1100. On the other hand, the *Windows* key is located conveniently next to the left-hand *ctrl* and *fn*. Those who are used to one-hand keyboard shortcuts will appreciate this. Unlike Toshiba, HP did not give up the second *ctrl* on the right hand. I am happy to see that the *insert* button migrated to the top right-hand corner, as I used confuse it with *Delete* and *Ctrl* on the Dell. However, I miss having that *delete* key on the bottom: instead, it's all the way in the corner with the *insert*. The keys are scratch-resistant, and clearly marked, with key names written in small letters.

- 2 USB ports
- PC card slot
- Headphone jack
- Microphone jack



[\(view large image\)](#)

Right side view of HP nc6400

- 1 USB
- Network jack
- Modem jack



[\(view large image\)](#)

Back side view of HP nc6400

- S-Video-out jack
- External monitor port
- Power connector
- Security cable slot

I do wish there were more USB ports, as on Asus (5) or even ThinkPad (4): I definitely use them all (USB-powered speakers, printer, +memory stick, iPod, digital camera).

Wireless

Intel Pro 802.11a/b/g with dual antenna works very well. I share a large house this summer, and have no problems picking up the signal from our router even in the basement.

I don't have any Bluetooth devices to test its operation.

Battery

The 6-cell battery gives 2hrs 45min of performance, without compromising on screen brightness or the number of tasks. It's never convenient for me run the computer with a dim screen, but I imagine that if your life should hang on that of the battery, you could squeeze 4 hours out of those cells.



HP nc6400 bottom view ([view large image](#))

Operating System and Software

The HP nc6400 comes with Windows XP Pro preinstalled. There are no disks. Unlike most laptops which arrive with lots of trial software, this laptop was actually under-configured. Even the company software must be unpacked using a software manager which installs everything, including InterVideo Win DVD, Sonic DVD maker, and even fingerprint sensor. (If you're using Nero, make sure to install *before* you install any manufacturer's software, otherwise the InCD won't install. Luckily, I learned my lesson on another computer).

Having had the occasion to take a look at different laptops currently on the market, I noticed something I did not expect: not all versions of Windows XP Pro are equal. They seem to be: all manufacturers list WinXP Pro with SP1, and after you get them, there are 36 updates, but certain features work better or worse on some than on others. For instance, on the Dell e1405, after setting up the keyboards for other languages in Regional settings, I was unable to get the language indicator icon next to the system tray. (The Dell customer service would tell me that this is not a standard feature). The log-on screens looked so different that one could even doubt that it's XP, and not the Home edition on the Dell.

I was happy to observe that I did not have any such problems with the version installed on HP nc6400.

I haven't much used the multiple security software, but I can already tell that it's not as user-friendly as ThinkPad's. With its choice of logins (fingerprints, tokens, passwords), it is software destined mainly for multi-user corporate client.

Customer support

As a rule, I approach customer support with skepticism. While the sales people are courteous and fairly knowledgeable (particularly in the business division), the technical support usually turns out rather inept. My only experience with HP support so far was pre-sales: I asked the technical representative to tell me what volume controls he saw in Volume options for Recording. That took two reps and half an hour. The other experience concerned the \$100 mail-in rebate which was supposed to come with the model. The website, which, until the day before I received my computer, featured information for outdated discounts, was updated, and no trace of the rebate! I will get it solved eventually, but the point is: you have to be on your toes.

On the other hand, I hope I won't have to use their technical support, while the 3-year-warranty should cover parts and service.

Carrying case

HP doesn't sell nice-fitting sleeves, and it is not that easy to find widescreen sleeves on the market. I bought mine from [Sony Vaio: its \\$24 Neoprene sleeves](#) are made right to size, as the Sony FJ & BX540 models have exactly the same dimensions. The sleeve came in with a nice pouch for the power cord.

Conclusion

The HP nc6400 is a great yet simple notebook, offering great performance. This is definitely a tool and not a toy. If you're looking for a gaming notebook, I would recommend higher graphics interface, perhaps an AMD processor. But if your main need is multitasking and occasional media, this is one of the best notebooks on the market. As a final note, although HP does not seem to offer customizable models, certain features can be changed (bigger hard drive, etc.), if you can afford to wait 4-5 weeks.

Pros

- Build quality
- Price
- Good performance
- Standard 3 Year warranty
- Matt screen
- Solid quiet keyboard with convenient layout
- Good-sounding speakers
- Looks
- No junk software
- Light-weight

Cons

- Asymmetrical placement of speakers
- No customized configuration
- Small touchpad buttons
- Limited wrist area