

Change Is Hard: Why You Should Give In to the New ThinkPad Keyboard

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Sometimes an outpouring of anger can reveal itself as a kind of profound love. I know it sounds strange but that's been my conclusion after moderating your comments across Lenovo's Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and YouTube pages over the past couple months. The source of the angst (as many of you know) is the recent design change to Lenovo's famous, award-winning, ergonomically-renowned ThinkPad laptop keyboard. Nearly every negative comment I've read has been delivered with a sense of ferocious loyalty, a sense of love. You're mad because you care. I respect that.

Here are two samples of what we've heard from you guys:

"Lenovo, have you lost your minds? Why did you do this? Did you do any research or testing or was this a whim? Have you messed up the classic ThinkPad typing experience?"

"What I'd like to hear is some real arguments about why this has been done. Such a well-established keyboard should not be changed for no good reason or just to change something!"

But wait, isn't this the same keyboard that Notebook Review called "fantastic" and The Verge said "makes a world of difference, improving on a historically splendid design?" (Perhaps the most apt quote came from Slashgear: "ThinkPad fans, put away your scythes and pitchforks: the legendary key travel appears to be unblemished, and the signature trackpoint 'nub' is still present.")

Is this the same keyboard that got this incredible endorsement from [LAPTOP Magazine](#)? “Putting a ThinkPad X1 at the fingers of a touch-typist is like placing a Stradivarius in the hands of a violinist. While all of Lenovo’s ThinkPads have strong keyboards, the ThinkPad X1 features the best laptop keyboard we’ve ever tested.”



In an effort to address the disconnect, we decided to put a few questions to Aaron Stewart, Senior Engineer for ThinkPad User Experience & Design. Aaron works closely with David Hill, the godfather of ThinkPad design, and basically spends every working hour thinking about how the slightest change might impact legions of ThinkPad users.

Q: Why do you think we are getting so much feedback about the new ThinkPad keyboard design—some of it quite negative—from so many devoted, longtime fans?

AARON: We do indeed have devoted fans with strong opinions about what makes a ThinkPad. Candidly, our long-time fans typically do not like change, particularly with our keyboard. We understand that completely. By design, the keyboard is central to the ThinkPad experience. So we don't take keyboard changes lightly. However, we constantly study ways to improve ThinkPad including our keyboard. We have done so since the first ThinkPad.

Q: You told me recently that the changes to the ThinkPad keyboard were several years in the making. How so?

A: There are two notable changes to the ThinkPad keyboard. One is the new key shape and the other is a more efficient layout. We have been studying and iteratively improving these particular attributes for more than four years. We decided to implement the changes throughout the 2012 ThinkPad line only when we knew they were, in fact, improvements.

Q: Some people have suggested that switching to a chiclet-style keyboard makes a ThinkPad less like a ThinkPad or more like everyone else. How do you respond to that and how are Lenovo’s chiclet keys any different from everyone else’s?

A: The debate between traditional and island or chiclet-style keys is an interesting one. Several years ago, all notebook computers had the traditional key shape. Use of island-style keys has increased across the industry as it simplifies and modernizes appearance. We were focused on how to merge the benefits of the traditional key shape with those of the island-style key shape. We dismissed flat, square island-style key shapes used by much of the industry. Fingers are neither square nor flat. The island-style key shape on the new ThinkPad keyboard enlarges the key top relative to traditional keys, which gives a larger sweet spot for key press. The new ThinkPad key shape also maintains a dished top and curved front edge for typing accuracy all while delivering a simpler, more modern appearance. The technology under the keys has not changed.



Q: The new keyboards have six rows of keys instead of seven. David Hill told me there's a learning curve to adjusting but he said it doesn't take long. Why did you make the change and what can you say to the programmers and coders who seem to be most put off by this?

A: The move from 7-row to 6-row only affects functions above the number row, which are generally for editing and navigation. Home, End, Insert and Delete are now positioned in order from left to right as they all address cursor position. Page Up/Down are positioned near the arrow keys so navigational controls are fully grouped. We have seen end-users comfortably adjust to these changes in less than an hour. Depending on personal use of these functions, other users may require a bit more time for the change to feel natural. However, this reset has occurred for every end-user in our extensive testing, typically with an ultimate preference for the new layout over the old. Legacy functions like Pause, Break and Scroll Lock are no longer overtly labelled on key tops, but remain accessible via key combinations using the Fn key (e.g., Fn+P = Pause).

Q: What kind of focus groups and/or testing did your team do before rolling out the design changes?

A: We often conduct different evaluations and user tests to maintain or improve the ThinkPad keyboard. However, to determine if and how we would make the changes to our keyboard in 2012, we embarked on one of the most in-depth keyboard studies ever conducted for ThinkPad. We did 350 hours of user testing with people in four countries. With each participant, we conducted 90- to 120-minute one-on-one interviews with hands-on use of different keyboard conditions to understand the latest about keyboard use and design preferences.

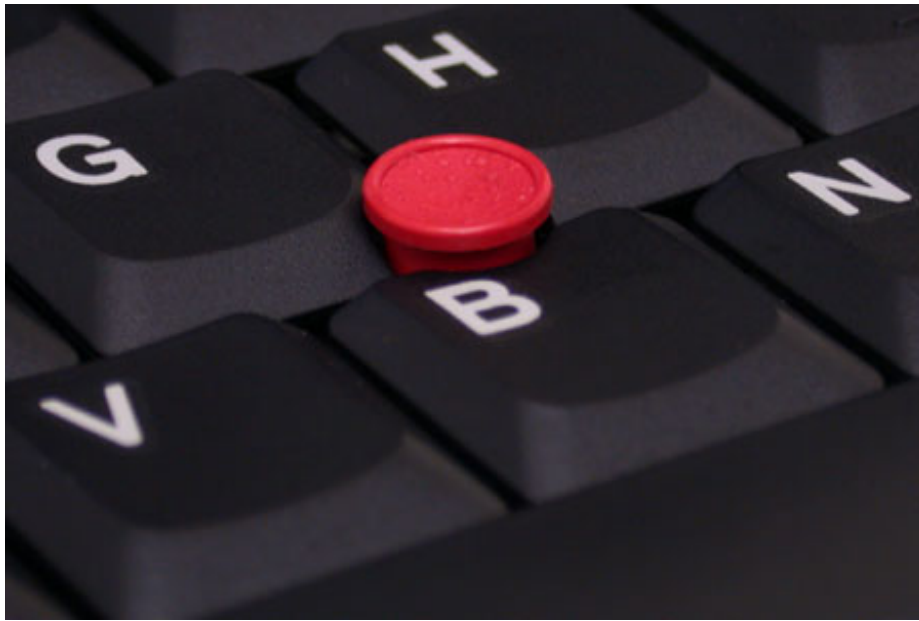


Q: The tech press—and our customers who have used the new keyboard—seem to be almost unanimous in their praise of it. The concerns seem to be coming from devoted ThinkPads fans who have not necessarily touched the new keyboard—do you think their concerns just demonstrate their love of the ThinkPad design and their desire to guard that legacy? How can you ever change something that is so beloved?

A: Yes, feeling is believing. I cannot expect all ThinkPad fans to welcome the news about the keyboard changes. But I urge them to try it before setting an opinion in stone. Use of a keyboard cannot be judged by looking at a picture. ThinkPad has evolved significantly over the years and will continue to do so. Our job is to deliver what we are known for while improving and remaining relevant. We will stay true to the elements that fundamentally make a ThinkPad a ThinkPad. All ThinkPads have an excellent keyboard—we have not changed that. The new keyboard is the best yet for ThinkPad.

Q: With all the excitement over the design changes, do you think anyone noticed that you added the backlight option? I'm convinced no one knows it's there.

A: I hope so, it's a great feature. We designed Fn+Space as the trigger to enable and adjust the keyboard backlight. If there is a light icon on your space bar, you have the backlight option. I use mine all the time.



Q: Last question, and I deliver this one with a wink—are you getting rid of the TrackPoint?

A: No. We study how to keep improving TrackPoint, not how to remove it.

OK, everyone. We've made our case here—it's in your hands now. (Or is it?) We would obviously love to hear from you in the comment field below. Many thanks for reading.

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