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Saving Green: New Help to Save on Power

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They say knowledge is power, but Microsoft and a partner are betting more knowledge means less power. The computer software giant has teamed with [Blue Line Innovations](#) and created a device that charts your home's electricity consumption – and cost – every 30 seconds, then displays it on your computer or a handheld device.

“You're getting real-time data so you can take real-time action,” says Troy Batterberry, product unit manager for [Microsoft Hohm](#), Microsoft's energy-saving website. “The Blue Line PowerCost Monitor and WiFi Gateway provide updates every 30 seconds, so you're getting real-time data so you can take real-time action. It's kind of like online banking for your energy bill, offering 24×7 access to your usage.”

As you saw in the video above, The Blue Line Monitor is several pieces of technology working together. The first is a power monitor that slips onto the power meter outside your house. That device sends information to a hand-held device that displays your energy usage. By adding a Wifi component, you can also display power usage on your computer screen.

The result: On either your computer screen or a small hand-held unit, you see how much electricity you consume when, say, you turn on the microwave or the air-conditioning kicks in – even when you leave the light on in the closet. Knowing your exact usage all the time reminds you to conserve energy. It also allows you to experiment by trying things like turning off the power strip that controls a home entertainment center, or changing a light bulb from incandescent to compact florescent.

Microsoft's collaboration with Blue Line is the first device partnership for Microsoft Hohm, but the company says its ultimate goal is to connect to smart plugs, thermostats, HVAC systems, electric vehicles and other devices so that consumers have as much information as possible to help them understand and reduce their energy consumption. The Blue Line Monitor doesn't come cheap: with Microsoft's Wi-Fi gateway, the suggested retail is \$249. For just the Blue Line Monitor and hand-held device, the price drops to \$99.

Another option is a fairly recent entrant to the field- currently in “public beta” – called [Wattvision](#). While it comes with the same type of monitoring device for the outside power meter, it has no hand-held unit – you check your power consumption on your desktop computer or smart phone. Since details on the pricing is sketchy on Wattvision's

website, I called and spoke to the company's founder, Savraj Singh. He told me the monitoring hardware (the gadget that attaches to your power meter and Wifi device) is \$199. They're also going to have a monthly fee for advanced tracking and information storage – that's not established yet – but Savraj assures me they'll always have a free basic plan.

The Microsoft/Blue Line monitor has no ongoing fee.

Then there's Google's [powermeter](#). No charge to see your power consumption online, but unless you're the customer of a very small [list of utilities](#), you'll need to [buy a device](#) (\$129 and up) to work with the software and display the data. You'll also need a *digital* power meter – one with a digital readout and not the spinning metal disc.

I've been using the Microsoft/Blue Line monitor at home for a couple of weeks now. (As I write this, I'm spending \$.63/hour on electricity.) It's really a handy device – if you don't gradually forget about it and allow it to get lost among the dozens of devices vying for your attention.

My prediction: In the not-too-distant future, this kind of real-time data will be widespread. It's important, the technology isn't overly complex, and it's information people should want to know. And speaking of information people should want to know: Be sure to check out our articles on saving energy around the house, including our most recent, [13 Cool Tips for Lower Energy Bills](#).