

Tablets & Smartphones: Business Tools or Toys?

Posted At : June 30, 2011 10:00 AM | Posted By : Admin

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(Editor's Note - We have been long associated with NMGI in Hutchinson, Ks. Randy and his partner Steve Harper are good friends. This is a great article on the use of mobile devices in your business and whether these devices are ready for prime time.)

Is this the year of the Tablet? Has the mobile Internet finally arrived? What business purposes are served by using mobile Internet devices, and how can they help us better serve clients? Whether you are working with products from Apple, Motorola, BlackBerry, HTC, Samsung or a myriad of other providers, access to the Internet, and applications or "apps" drive the mobile world. Today, you can use apps that give you access to paperless documents from your office, provide clarification of a business rule from a quick check of research, have the ability to take a note to jog an idea, or to take enough notes for an entire draft memo. You can initiate a print job from anywhere to shared Internet printers, read a document that has been synchronized to the mobile device after being scanned, read books, publications, news sources, email, and consume content from almost any popular source.

Apps make it possible to listen to and see news feeds, video conferences, record video, take and view pictures, and access multimedia content from internet sources. While there are limitations, most users now agree that they are so few that a new age of mobility has arrived. Devices that enable the mobile Internet, whether phones or tablets, are used for consumption of content. They may not be the most efficient data-entry devices, but they are probably sufficient for light duty entry. Sitting in your home, during a commute, at a client's office or in a meeting with access to items you consider critical or convenient can be very enabling or distracting.

What is your plan?

Like many aspects of business, you must first define your need. This is a fundamental rule for all good information technology systems. We each have responsibilities and tasks to complete. What would you like to be able to do when you are not at your desk and what do you have to do? Next, you need to define the purpose of your mobile device. When cell phones first arrived, many were resistant to the idea of carrying a phone all of the time and being too accessible. Cost, size, background noise and clarity of calls were all issues. Today, don't we consider the cell phone a vital business tool that aides in convenience, safety, as well family and client communication and service? Carrying only one mobile device would be preferred, but the limitations of screen size, speed and convenient keyboard entry make this particular goal questionable. Products like the Motorola Atrix are trying to overcome these objections by providing a docking station that is both a larger screen and a keyboard, while having dual processors in the phone itself. Others, like Steve Jobs from Apple, have backed larger screen sizes saying a 7-inch screen would be "too small to express the software." He said 10 inches was the minimum for a tablet screen. Hence the screen size on the iPad.

Maybe it is age or maybe it is just failing eyesight, but the small screen of a smartphone can be too restrictive to be productive. Yes, you can zoom the image in and out, but this can be a waste of time. However, access to information may still be better than no access at all.

A phrase that has become popular over the last few years is, "You don't know what you don't know." This is particularly true with smartphones and tablets. Starting with what you do know can make your business and personal activities easier, and other purposes will reveal

themselves and evolve over time.

Choices, options and opinions

The Consumer Electronics Show (CES) is often used to launch new products, and tablets were dominant at this year's show, as were supporting products for the iPad. The same has been true for cell phones in the past. You can find many opinions, summaries and marketing hype online from this show and other sources. Two mainstream efforts exist for mobile devices: Apple with its iPhone, iPad and iOS and the open source market supported by the Google Android operating system, often simply called Droid, supported by hardware players like Motorola, Samsung and HTC. There are other mobile strategies have been advanced by Microsoft, BlackBerry and Hewlett Packard, with Windows Mobile, the popular and addictive RIM "Blackberry" devices that have been so productive and enabling, and Palm OS-based devices that HP acquired in 2010. Each of these five strategies could be successful in their own right if the others did not exist. For clarity, the rest of this article will be written with focus on the Apple methodology because of the success of the iPad tablet and iPhone. With the arrival of the next iPhone and iPad 2 in 2011, Apple will revise and refine an already successful strategy.

One thing is clear. A strategy using any of the five approaches available at the time of this writing can be successful if the device and the apps meet your needs. The Android shows more promise and increasing speed of adoption, and the Blackberry approach shows more focus on business needs. And Apple is the market leader between the iPhone, iPod Touch, and iPad. They also have by far the most "apps" on the market and the best app delivery system.

Generically, solving for the business problems of email, web access, document access and note taking can be accomplished by all five strategies named above. The simplicity and elegance of approach is a debatable point, which many have expressed in passionate arguments. Solving business problems efficiently can be done in all approaches. Running a few apps and integrating to well-known systems like Microsoft Exchange or Gmail for email can be solved, sometimes elegantly, on all platforms. You will have more flexibility because of the quantity of apps on the Apple platform, and you will have more lock-in because of iTunes, the app store and Apple's current restriction of the product.

The greater concern for tablets and smartphones beyond initial price is the ongoing operational cost. Remote access is enabled with cellular or wireless built into almost all versions. Devices have prices that are much lower when purchased with ongoing cellular data subscriptions that have entry-level base monthly charges of \$15 to \$30 per month. Running over the typical base limit of 1GB to 5GB of data transfer per month can rack up additional charges of \$10/GB or more, depending on the plan. Unlimited data plans cost even more or may be unavailable. Most smartphones and tablets today detect if Wi-Fi wireless is available and automatically default to use it. Wi-Fi is faster, and this conserves cellular data for when access via cellular is the only option. After initial configuration, the benefit of adding a cellular plan to a smartphone or tablet is that the device can be used for Internet access with no additional setup beyond turning the device on. If your primary places of use are the office and home, and you have Wi-Fi in both places, a cellular plan is completely unnecessary.

Vendors have also responded to the demand of remote Windows applications on the iPad by updating the popular Citrix and VMware environments with the Citrix Receiver for iPad and VMware TeamViewer. These software products connect the iPad back to the servers running the Windows applications, and permit all Windows applications to run on the iPad. Smaller firms may not have the technology to use these more expensive tools nor the expertise to do the implementation. Alternatively, an app to access a PC or Mac desktop called LogMeIn Ignition allows a tablet computer to run Windows applications hosted on a single computer at the home or in the office. All of these options work today, albeit slowly, and possibly unacceptably for your purposes. However, slow Windows application access may be better

than no Windows application access at all.

Focus, distraction or information?

It's easy to fall into the trap of performing low-value activities instead of thinking strategically. Responding to everything as if it is urgent may prevent you from taking care of items that are important.

Some organizations are trying strategies to help people focus. Current attempts include Email free Fridays and technology checked at the door during important meetings to minimize distractions. Mobile technology is about balance and enablement. All tools can be used for good or bad, and on the whole, smartphones and tablets can greatly assist productivity with few distractions.

Looking up critical facts to keep a discussion moving in the right direction or to keep a potential solution from being based on completely wrong assumptions can be highly effective. "Facts" that are looked up on the fly can also be wrong or based on incorrect assumptions, and can direct a meeting or discussion to a wrong conclusion. However, in most cases, light fact checking during a meeting is not a distraction, but rather an enabler. Taking notes, particularly projected or on a large monitor, can keep everyone on the same page. Agreed upon action items can help after a meeting to make sure everything is completed.

Rude distractions, such as taking calls during meetings or showing unrelated or inappropriate content simply because it is convenient is not so much a technical problem as it is a discipline or management problem. Enable your team with the appropriate mobile technology, and agree to some flexible ground rules or policies on how the technology can and should be used.