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Equipping Your Office

The product and service offerings to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of your business office are evolving at a rapid rate. So much so, that I fear that some parts of this article may become obsolete before you are able to read it.

Many factors impact your decision-making when deciding the equipment for your office: number of employees, single vs. multiple locations, employee technology acumen, etc.

APPLES, WINDOWS OR PENGUINS?

We have all been amused by the increasingly contentious Apple and Microsoft television commercials. Although it can be difficult for the less technically savvy individual to navigate through the chatter, competition does provide us with choices. The first factor to consider is which operating system is best suited for your primary software application. Consult your software supplier to answer this question. You may think that if you are using the vendor hosted, browser based, SaaS model that you are operating system agnostic. This is generally not true. The application is usually optimized for certain browsers, and helper components that interface with printers, scanners, and other devices may work better (or only) in selected environments.

If your vendor does not indicate a preference, here are a few items to consider:

- **Cost:** Windows-based equipment is generally less expensive, typically about half the cost of a similarly equipped Apple machine.
- **Style:** Apple designs are more stylish than most Windows competitors.
- **Availability and Choice:** There is only one source of Apple equipment, whereas there are many suppliers of Windows machines.
- **Startup Time:** Apple computers typically boot faster than Windows equipment.
- **Applications:** The wider popularity of Windows provides a significantly greater number of software applications.
- **Viruses:** Because Apple controls all aspects of the machine and has a smaller market share,

Apple machines are not as susceptible to malicious software.

- **Ease of Use:** This is a personal issue with strong proponents on both sides; I'll stay out of this debate!

A third operating system, Linux and its variations, is an evolving choice. Although it is the least expensive (free), most reliable (can run for years without a reboot), and most secure of the alternatives, finding support and applications limit its place in the business environment.

LAPTOP OR DESKTOP? NETBOOK OR TABLET?

Laptops are shrinking in size at the same time as more functionality is crammed into these packages. Meanwhile desktops are getting more powerful as their prices continue to drop. How do you select the right one for your business?

Mobility and cost are the main drivers. Smaller size and lighter weight come with a cost; a laptop is typically more expensive than a desktop with equivalent features, although this gap is shrinking. The smaller package also extracts other compromises such as screen size and ergonomics. You can purchase an external display, keyboard, and mouse to mitigate these deficiencies although you are adding to the cost and bulk and price.

If portability is important, the netbook and tablet present additional alternatives to the laptop. They are less expensive and smaller/lighter, but less powerful and not very functional if you have a lot of data entry to do. Advances in laptops are blurring the distinction with netbooks and hybrid netbook-tablet designs are offering standard keyboards with flip-able touch screens.

Considerations if mobility is key:

- Integrated cellular modems provide built-in connectivity when you are outside of a Wi-Fi zone, but be aware that a data contract from a wireless provider is an added cost.
- A new feature, Wireless Display (Wi-Di), can eliminate the need for a cable to display on a



properly equipped flat screen television (adapters are also available).

Other features to consider:

- **Memory:** include at least 2 GB of memory (RAM) with 4 GB preferred.
- **Hard Drive:** select at least a 320 GB hard disk. Solid State Drives (SSD) are dropping significantly in price and offer greatly increased performance you will notice.
- **Processor:** specify a 64-bit processor for faster operation if the cost premium is not large.
- **Device Connections:** the much faster USB 3.0 port is another feature to look for.
- **Multiple Screens:** adding a second monitor can increase productivity and reduce errors (a number of studies support this); the increased effective display area allows viewing of multiple applications and, for the over fifty crowd, larger font sizes that are easier on the eyes.

PRINTING, COPYING, FAXING, SCANNING

It wasn't so long ago when you purchased a printer, copier, fax machine, and scanner as separate pieces of equipment. The arrival of the MFP - Multi Function Product/ Printer/ Peripheral (or other words that start with a P) have changed the office landscape. A networked device can save you space, clutter, and money. The cost of an MFP is much less than that of multiple devices and a single toner type (a laser print engine will provide additional savings over an ink jet head) reduces inventorying multiple types.

MFPs fall into one of four categories based on printer technology, speed in pages per minute (ppm) and duty cycle:

- **All-in-One (AIO):** small desktop unit designed for personal or home use using ink cartridges with a direct USB connection to your computer.
- **Small Office/Home Office (SOHO):** large desktop for use in a small office or home office; look for networking (Ethernet or wireless) and automatic document feeding.
- **Office:** typically a networked free standing unit with advanced document handling features like duplexing and stapling.
- **Production Printing:** for heavy production needs such as book printing starting at 100 ppm.

When selecting a MFP consider the following:

- **Connectivity:** networked, wired (Ethernet) or wireless (Wi-Fi); make sure that software drivers are available for computers you plan to connect.
- **Printing:** laser engine, a true resolution of 300 dots per inch (dpi) or more, letter (8.5 x 11) paper size with 11" x 17" a plus, duplex (double-sided) saves paper.
- **Scanning:** an automatic document feeder (ADF) and duplex (both page sides) scanning with minimum of 300dpi resolution; output file formats of .pdf and .jpg; optical character recognition (OCR) exporting directly to your document creation format (typically Microsoft Word); advanced features include intelligent character recognition (ICR) which expands the font types and printed handwriting that can be converted and document recognition which uses pattern matching to distinguish leases from invoices and extracts metadata.

LIVING COLOR

Many studies have been conducted regarding the importance of color in communication. Some of the findings of the value of color vs. black and white:

- improves viewership up to 80 percent
- information is absorbed up to 70 percent faster
- effectiveness improves 77 percent

The cost of color printers has dropped dramatically with good office lasers below the \$400 price point. Their speed has improved (25 pages/min) and their footprint is approaching that of an equivalent black and white version.

Competition and economies of scale are driving down supply costs. Many online vendors will deliver the multiple toner cartridges to your office at a fraction of the price of traditional office supply outlets. Most color printers incorporate a separate black cartridge effectively removing the penalty to produce just black-and-white pages.

IN CLOSING

There are many technology considerations in outfitting your office. Your computer(s) and peripherals are just the start. We will explore other items next month such as your phone system and networking. 📞

When outfitting your office, your computers and peripherals are just the start of the many technologies to consider.