

Hello iPad, adieu desktop: Post-PC era - spin or fact?

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Are reports of the desktop's death greatly exaggerated or are we really entering the tablet age?

There are usually two diverse opinions voiced with the introduction of any new technology. Some will present it as the solution to everything and use it despite adverse consequences, others will deny it has any real value and rigidly stick to what they've become used to.

There have been plenty of instances of the former view. From examples such as The Last One, a 1980s tool aimed to replace the need to ever write software again, to the Apple Newton touchscreen PDA in the 1990s, disappointment can quickly follow impressive overhype.

What the vendors think will be major milestones or paradigm shifts turn into inch pebbles and blips on the technology landscape. Those who have adopted unreservedly find they are stuck down a cul-de-sac and have to change plans and start again. So is it safer to be a cynic?

Risk of a missed tech opportunity

Not always. The risk, often stated by those hyping up the technology, is of being completely left behind. While this scenario might overstate the issue, there is the risk of a missed opportunity to re-evaluate what the business and its stakeholders are really about.

For example: the recent surge in interest in tablets, in particular Apple's iPad. Notwithstanding that anyone who has the slightest positive comment is labelled a fanboy, detractors of their business merits focus on two main aspects - lack of a real keyboard and poor support for Microsoft Office. Both are valid comments, especially as they are often made in the context of the tablet as a laptop or even desktop replacement. However, the word replacement needs more scrutiny.

When computers entered the working environment, they replaced previously manual central-processing functions, and most people had little direct interaction

with them. Only when PCs became pervasive did a major change occur from an employee's perspective.

To do work, it became necessary for many to go to a computer, typically at a desk. However, few roles truly need to be deskbound for the whole working day. There may have been some whose *raison d'être* is content creation - graphical or textual - where sitting at a drawing board or typewriter was the norm. But most workers in offices, factories and hospitals only need a desk for somewhere to belong, do the odd bit of paperwork and these days occasionally access their PC.

Proliferation of unmanaged data and communications overload

However, as PCs became more pervasive and embedded in working practices, people became tethered to the desktop. And since it was now equipped with various applications so that anyone could easily and casually create content - presentations, spreadsheets, documents or email - they did. The result? A proliferation of unmanaged data and communications overload.

The John Cleese training video Meetings, Bloody Meetings, about how companies and individuals get sucked into constant time-wasting meetings instead of working on what is really important, could be re-mastered for the digital age as Desktops, Bloody Desktops.

Over the past couple of decades the proliferation of PCs, then laptops, with almost ubiquitous connectivity, has spread concepts and technology from the world of work into the heart of the home. The recent arrival of smartphones and tablets combined with widespread cellular networks has accelerated more individual aspects including social networking and the opposite movement of consumer technology into the workplace.

Now the main technology themes surrounding businesses are attempts to bring cohesion to it all to improve worker productivity with mobile working, unified communications and collaboration.

Implications for the future of the PC

The impact on the once-dominant PC in all this change is intriguing. While PCs have greatly evolved they are still, at heart, the marriage of a typewriter and monitor, forcing creative use onto a desk or a lap. Bloated files of charts, busy pages of words and data tables of cells ensure that users need to keep close to the screen.

Everybody can use a PC or laptop to communicate, receiving emails in remote locations, making calls with IP telephony or messaging, but in a closed and personal way, almost oblivious to those physically around them. The experience is relatively formal, contrived and difficult to share - either to collaborate with someone alongside, or to pass to someone over a desk.

The tablet form factor is far more informal, akin to a piece of paper. It is not personal computing but generally a shared digital experience. It is not well suited to the overweight and stilted data of an office desktop, but to consolidated, filtered, aggregated information and multimedia content.

The combination of social interaction, smart consumer design, universal network access and power to drive all digital content seems to fit the bill. It allows most people to get on with the productive activities they need to do, rather than be constrained by a technology straightjacket that wastes time.

Weighing up a major change of technology

There are many highly successful products that have a major impact over a long period of time but eventually start to outlive their usefulness or relevance. It then becomes worth considering a major change, no matter how problematic it first appears.

Some will cynically see the increasing sales of tablets like the Apple iPad as the latest fad or craze - fine for the techno-junkies and Apple fanboys but not relevant to the real world which is filled with serious tools such as BlackBerrys and Microsoft Office.

The reality is that working practices have always adapted to fit the constraints and limitations of the tools available. New tools give everyone an opportunity to reappraise business and personal practices. They allow people to discover whether they have been blinkered to new possibilities by being too settled with 'that's how it's always been'.

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Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first-hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

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