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TechnoFeature: The Tablet PC Revolution

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SYNOPSIS

In this article, legal technologist Seth Rowland predicts that the Tablet PC will revolutionize the way lawyers work and interact with their clients. With the evolution of fully powered Tablet PCs and wireless networks, the Tablet PC has emerged as a productivity force that can now serve an important purpose in client meetings, not just as an expensive note-taking device. With the proper software, the Tablet PC can bring attorney and client closer together and foster greater productivity. Could a Tablet PC empower your legal practice? Read this article to find out. This article contains 1,776 words.

TECHNOFEATURE: THE TABLET PC REVOLUTION
By Seth Rowland, mailto:sgr@bashasys.com
(This article is a TechnoLawyer Exclusive.)

INTRODUCTION

The Tablet PC Revolution has been a long time coming. The use of a "tablet" as a means of communication has ancient origins. Look to the Hebrew and Christian Bible for sources.

There were the Ten Commandments -- written on a tablet. In the Book of Isaiah, it is written: "And now, go, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness for ever" (Isaiah 30:8).

Tablets were used to record visions: "Then the LORD answered me and said: Write down the vision. Clearly upon the tablets, so that one can read it readily" (Habakkuk 2:2).

Or even better: "He asked for a tablet and wrote, 'John is his name,' and all were amazed" (Luke 1:63).

Tablet PC technology has advanced through the millennia. Tablet PCs weigh much less than those used by Moses when he came down from Mt. Sinai. The text storage is virtually unlimited; today's Tablet PC could in fact store the entire Torah, Talmud, and commentaries with gigabytes to spare. And

the ability to communicate with a tablet connected through a WiFi network to the Internet dwarfs the ability of the early tablet writers.

TRANSFORMATIVE TOOLS

A change has come in recent years that heralds the emergence of the Tablet PC from the toy of the "early adopters" to a central tool in the arsenal of the attorney. With today's Tablet PC, you can store "all the laws" and "all the cases" and "all the documents" and "all the work product" in a device than can weigh less than 14 ounces and fit in your pocket. The Tablet PC accomplishes this using the same core software that sits on your desktop or laptop PC, with a few important extras.

Undoubtedly, technology has transformed legal practice. With the widespread use of case management, lawyers can now manage their schedules and files with a minimum of administrative overhead. With the adoption of document assembly tools like HotDocs, GhostFill, and DealBuilder, a single lawyer can prove many times as productive.

BREAKING DOWN THE BERLIN WALL

To use these tools, however, the lawyer must sit behind a "wall" -- whether that be a desktop monitor or a laptop screen -- in his office. This wall divides the lawyer from his client, opposing counsel, or witness. The computer shields full and complete communication. Placing a laptop with the screen flipped up in front of you on a conference room table creates a physical barrier between you and others in the room. It suggests that the lawyer may not be fully listening (he could be checking his e-mail). And nothing is more distracting during a meeting, than having a participant typing away on a laptop.

In contrast, the Tablet PC gives the lawyer the "same PC" but in a new form. About the size of a thick notepad, the Tablet rests on the desk or the lap. It appears as no different than taking notes on a pad. The Tablet lies open for all to see. It can easily be shared, or shown to a neighbor to illustrate a point.

FREEING UP YOUR MIND FOR THE WORK AT HAND

When you type on a laptop, your brain is engaged not only in listening, but in using both your hands and eyes to operate the computer. This activity can cause you to tune out of the meeting.

By contrast, when writing on a Tablet PC with a pen, your mind stays focused on the meeting; it comes naturally. We can all take notes, listen and contribute, remaining engaged in the meeting at hand.

RESTORING EYE CONTACT

Have you ever tried to look a witness in the eye while you type notes about what the witness was saying. Unless you are a "touch typer" doing so is practically impossible.

However, it is easy to scribble notes on a pad while talking

to someone. You can use diagrams and shorthand. And you can always clean up the notes later, if needed.

By restoring eye contact, you can convey the perception of others that you are engaged and personable.

Even more important to the attorney, you can "take notes" while at the same time judging the demeanor of your interlocutor. You can read body language. And, you can decrease the "personal space" between you and your interlocutor to convey either the "seriousness" or the "compassion" of the listener.

DIGITAL INK -- NOT JUST NOTES

Typing works because it can be understood by everyone, categorized, and searched. The Tablet PC introduces Digital Ink, which has two ramifications.

First, digital ink is no longer limited to "words," but can include illustrations and symbols, sketches, and drawings. The "ink" can be archived for later review, readily copied, printed, and even e-mailed to someone for review.

Second, Digital Ink can also be "searched." The Tablet PC gives you the option to write in script or print and have it "directly converted" to typed text, or to have the written text "indexed" in the background, letting you search your notes as you would run a file search.

Yes, handwriting is back and here to stay. It facilitates creativity in your note taking. Handwriting communicates more about the meaning of your notes. You can integrate the notes with sketches and expressive marks on the note-taking page. You can "doodle." You can copy information from whiteboards and presentations.

All in all, it emerges as an easier and more powerful medium for "recording" ideas than a keyboard.

ONE NOTE

Microsoft has extended the Tablet PC even further. The Tablet PC ships with a "Journal" which is a virtual notepad that even looks like a legal pad, depending on the template you choose.

But it goes a step further with a product called "One Note." This product lets you create virtual notebooks, with tabs and subtabs that mix typed text, illustrations, handwritten notes, pictures, and even voice notes.

You can now "dictate" to your Tablet PC and it will record your voice and save it to the note. The Tablet PC even features voice recognition, not fully implemented, that will translate your spoken note, into a searchable written note.

DOCUMENT ASSEMBLY TO GO

When it comes to drafting documents, keyboards are very fast. But access your HotDocs or GhostFill template library from a Tablet PC during a client meeting, and discover a whole new realm of legal practice. Using a tablet-optimized questionnaire with checkboxes and pulldown menus, you can

deliver a range of documents while the meeting is in progress -- the ultimate in client service.

Imagine meeting with a client to prepare an estate plan; taking notes on an electronic worksheet for the type of structure the client needs to preserve their wealth for future generations.

Now imagine that worksheet as a document assembly interview which generates a summary of the client's requirement for the client to review before the end of the meeting. You could even have the estate planning documents ready for the client to sign and get witnessed when she returns from lunch.

This example just marks the beginning of this revolution in Tablet PC-driven client service.

INFORMATION SECURITY

Windows XP Tablet PC Edition offers all the security features of Windows XP Professional, including the Encrypting File System (EFS) security feature and the access control feature. Tablet PC also supports secure network login using a single hardware button.

I recently purchased a Motion Computing M1400 Slate Tablet <http://www.motioncomputing.com>. I had considered the Fujitsu Stylistic ST5000 <http://www.computers.us.fujitsu.com>, but chose the M1400 for weight, less than 3 pounds, and its superbright screen which I can read in broad sunlight.

The M1400 came with a biometric fingerprint scanner. It can be configured to restrict access to the Tablet's data (even encrypt the data) until the proper fingerprint scan or code is entered.

The implications for a highly portable device that can hold 40 gigabytes of data, yet slip into a briefcase, means that your work product, client confidences, and trade secrets can be kept secure, even if your device is stolen.

SLATE VERSUS CONVERTIBLE

I made the choice to purchase a Tablet PC to supplement my main desktop computer. With its Pentium M 1.5 ghz, 40 GB hard drive and up to 2 GB of RAM, my Motion M1400 Slate could serve many lawyers as their main computer.

However, I like to work with dual 19 inch monitors, a wall of technology on my desktop. It gives me the maximum virtual space. For me, a 12.2 inch screen was just too small. I use Network Unplugged <http://www.mobiliti.com> to synchronize with my network when I leave the range of my WiFi router.

I toyed with Convertible Tablets. These are basically ultra-lite laptop computers in which the screen flips back and covers the keyboard when used in "slate" mode. These are for the "budget conscious" since the Tablet does double duty as a laptop and a slate.

Some models to consider include: Acer TravelMate C300 <http://us.acer.com>, Panasonic Toughbook 18 <http://www.panasonic.com>, Hewlett-Packard TC4200

<http://h18000.www1.hp.com/products/tabletpc>, and Fujitsu LifeBook T4000 <http://www.computers.us.fujitsu.com/>.

However, these computers tend to weigh more and seem bulkier than the slate Tablet PCs. For me, every ounce counts when lugging a Tablet PC around because the Tablet PC is meant to be taken EVERYWHERE, not just lugged from the office to the home and back again.

The Tablet PC should be as unobtrusive as possible. The more it resembles a pad of paper, the more it will facilitate the goals identified above.

If weight remains a major factor for you, then you might want to consider the OQO Model 01 <http://www.oqo.com>. Just 4.9 inches long, 3.4 inches wide, .9 inches thin, and weighing only 14 ounces, the Model 01 can fit in a pocket or purse and go with you anywhere.

At 14 ounces, it weighs more than a PocketPC, but it comes with a thumb keyboard, and can connect to a USB hub and external monitor and function as a full computer. When you finish with it, just pop the computer in your pocket and take it with you everywhere.

If you want something more rugged, you might consider the Rugged iX104 Tablet from Xplore <http://www.xploretech.com/index.pl>. Designed and tested to meet stringent Military Environmental Standards (MIL STD 810F), the iX104 family of Tablet PCs can endure drops to concrete from up to four feet, extreme temperatures, and exposure to water and dust.

CONCLUSION

A Tablet PC may just be in your future, whether it serves as your primary or secondary computer. You will not regret your choice.

Respond to this TechnoFeature: mailto:post@technolawyer.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Recovered attorney, Seth Rowland, was named TechnoLawyer Consultant of the Year in 2002 for his contributions to TechnoLawyer on the subject of document assembly and law practice automation. He is a nationally known technologist whose company has helped many law firms and content providers build document assembly applications for both internal use and for resale. His company, Basha Systems LLC <http://www.bashasys.com>, has partnership agreements with the developers of HotDocs, Time Matters, GhostFill, and DealBuilder. Please feel free to visit his blog for the latest on legal technology <http://www.bashasys.info>. You can contact Seth via e-mail at or telephone at (914-827-9173).

Community Manager's Notes