



Tech Coach Corner – Desktop or Laptop or Tablet – Oh My

by LTCL Tech Coach, Jeff Lazar

With just under four months until Christmas, my thoughts turn to toys...specifically, electronic toys like computers. But my desktop (Windows 10 Pro) has been in service for barely a year, my laptop (top of the line Dell ultra-portable) only a couple of years, and my iPad Pro 12-inch not even a year old. But as I thought about toys, I figured that a discussion of the whats, whys, and wherefores of the different machine platforms might be useful. To be clear, this will not be a discussion or comparison of operating systems on these machine platforms, but rather a focus on type of hardware with some additional comments.

So, let's start with a question: Assuming you have one of the three different types of machines (desktop, laptop, and tablet) – or want to buy one – what do you do with it? And away we go.

Because of my work, I live in the PC/Windows world – a fair bit of the scientific software I use just won't work properly and reasonably quickly on an Apple product...no matter what Apple and their aficionados say. But that really gets to the issue of what kind of machine you need (need, not want).

So, again, what do you do or want to do with your electronic toys? And how many different operating systems do you want to learn?

If your main use is creating and editing documents (a lot of my work is that), then a desktop machine with a generously-sized monitor and a good, solid keyboard (mine is mechanical) must be a contender... and it probably does not matter if it is an Apple product or uses Windows. I have always been a PC/DOS/Windows person, but I am aware that younger folks and creative types (artists and musicians among them) have a preference for Apple products. If you don't need to move your documents back and forth between platforms, then it doesn't matter. Full stop. Find a machine you like, a monitor you like, and a keyboard you like...but remember that an Apple product will usually cost more than an equivalent Windows machine.

Because my desktop is a Windows machine, my laptop is necessarily a Windows machine. I want to be able to fetch a document when I am on the road, and not worry about cross-platform issues (still not 100% solved, despite what Apple and Microsoft claim). I want to be able to use the specialized software that really runs only in the Windows environment. But I hate typing on the laptop (except for some very high-end gaming laptops, all the keyboards feel as if they were made by The Broken Keyboard Company), and I will not drag an external keyboard with me when I am on the road.

On the other hand, **if your main use is texting, emailing, web browsing, and exchanging pictures** with the kids, grandkids, and the members of the garden club, then a tablet makes a lot of sense. The built-in “keyboards” aren’t keyboards but appear on the screen. Nevertheless, you can learn to dictate your message if you pronounce your words clearly and precisely. (My iPad even recognizes when I switch from English to German.)

However, if you aren’t using specialized software, and you aren’t traveling on business, then what can you do on a “computer” that you cannot do on a “tablet” (either iOS or android). The answer is not much. Can you do everything on my iPad that I can do on my computer? The answer is a qualified “yes.”

A few concluding thoughts. If you already have a laptop, you might consider converting it to the equivalent of a desktop: a docking station, a monitor (I have a 24” monitor and sometimes wish I had a larger one), and a keyboard. You can also skip the docking station and just plug the monitor and keyboard into your laptop. It’s a bit less flexible arrangement, but it will save some cost (\$100 and upwards).

Finally, we Tech Coaches have the impression that the bulk of users are using primary email and web browsing (“surfing the Internet”). Any of the platforms will do the trick but typing on a tablet is not pleasant unless you attach a keyboard. Pricewise, tablets generally are more expensive than a desktop but less costly than a laptop. But I will share with you that I hate-hate-hate typing on my iPad, and typically will dictate. So, if you already have a tablet, consider the addition of a keyboard. That might be the least expensive upgrade solution of all.

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