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ATG Special Report: Chromebook or Surface Pro for the Library Enterprise?

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Chromebook or Surface Pro for the Library Enterprise?

ASU Libraries Mobile Technology Test Pilot

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The Case

Librarians’ work has gone mobile. We use smartphones and tablets in our personal lives; why not take advantage of them at work?

Last fall 2013, the Informatics and Cyberinfrastructure Services department at ASU Libraries, asked librarians (the authors) Mimmo Bonanni and Dennis Brunning to investigate technology needs in today’s mobile workflow. The proposal was to purchase and test mobile technology for a select test group of librarians. We decided to concentrate on lightweight, inexpensive, powerful mobile computing platforms for librarians. Two models stood out: tablets and Chromebooks. The question was: can tablets or Chromebooks replace or act as positive additional tools for the day-to-day work of librarians?

We randomly selected ten librarians to receive Google Samsung Chromebooks and Microsoft Surfaces with keyboards. Five Chromebooks and five Surfaces were given out by lottery.

The librarians agreed to use either the Surface or the Chromebook as their primary computer in the late fall (Nov/Dec 2013) and early spring semesters (Jan/Feb 2014). The group also agreed to provide feedback on their experience via online spreadsheets, and monthly discussion meetings. Librarians also agreed to use either the Surface or the Chromebook to record what app or program they were using and record on a Likert satisfaction scale of 1-5 whether the app had a high rate satisfaction (5) or low satisfaction (1). In the spreadsheet, we asked the librarians to also record the date of use, and also any comments they would have about the app or program based on the above criteria. Library staff recorded the input over a four-month period, November 2013 - February 2014. The authors also gathered input from the librarians during monthly meetings.

During the monthly meetings, we had open discussions based on the input gathered in the MS Excel or Google Spreadsheets. The discussions covered the criteria of how effective the mobile technologies were in the day-to-day workflow for communication, document writing, and work specific projects.

Findings

We discovered that there were certain advantages to using a tablet, and other advantages to using a Chromebook:

- Long battery life on a single charge. Can use a full workday without charging.
- Can Install third-party apps like Dropbox, Facebook, Twitter.
- Built-in cloud functionality; retrieve documents to the drive of the tablet (for the Chromebook users).
- Mobile works well remotely; taking notes, answering reference questions. Users are not tied to offices.
- Mobility helps librarians stay engaged even when out-of-office.
- Lighter and smaller form factor than previous laptops.
- Inexpensive compared to a laptop.
- Built-in cloud functionality; retrieve documents without having to save to hard drive (i.e., Surface had MS SkyDrive; Chromebook has Google Drive).
- Some shared disadvantages of both include:
  - No remote desktop functionality; including VPN or Remote Desktop.
  - Not all library-related apps are available, like libraries ILS (Integrated Library System), or library suggested products like Mendeley.
  - Both products do not have a completed integrated enterprise system using apps; cannot get access to network files or network printers.
  - Better offline capabilities; when offline you can save documents to the drive of the tablet and upload to Skydrive later.

Some shared disadvantages of both include:

- No remote desktop functionality; including VPN or Remote Desktop.
- Not all library-related apps are available, like libraries ILS (Integrated Library System), or library suggested products like Mendeley.
- Both products do not have a completed integrated enterprise system using apps; cannot get access to network files or network printers.
- Would need to develop a new mobile ASU Libraries image.
- Built-in cloud functionality would need system integration work with ASU Libraries.
- Confidentiality: Mobility means if lost, staff information is less secure.
- Both tablets and Chromebooks rely on an Internet connection: offline work for both is limited.

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Some disadvantages were unique to the technology, like:

- Apps used by library staff for committee and group work like Skype and MS Office are not available for Chromebook.
- Chromebook runs Chrome OS, and Chrome OS has much less Apps available than the MS Store. Can’t install traditional software like MS Office or Adobe Photoshop or Skype. Chrome OS equivalents like Google Docs or Pixlr Editor are not as fully functional.
- Chromebook screen is not as vibrant, which makes it less effective for reading documents.

During the meetings, the authors also prompted and guided discussions based on several questions. The questions were designed to help expound on the already gathered input from librarians, and lead to a consensus decision on what technology this group of ten librarians recommends. Discussion questions included:

- If ASU Libraries had an ample budget to purchase mobile technology, which of the two devices would you recommend?
- If ASU Libraries only had the budget for one mobile technology (either Surface or Chromebook), what would need to be changed to either the Surface or Chromebook in order to make it more functional for ASU librarian workflow?
- What are the major positives/negatives for either the MS Surface to the Google Chromebook?
- If our goal for future mobile technology is to replace our current library computing desktops, what would we suggest for purchase?
- If our goal for future mobile technology is to have a secondary mobile device to augment our current library computing desktops, what would we suggest for purchase?
- How can these mobile devices (either MS Surface or Samsung Chromebook) transform a librarian’s workflow and work life?

These guided discussions took place over two separate meetings in February 2014. Both meetings included members from both the MS Surface and the Google Chromebook groups. At the meetings, each group discussed the merit of either replacing librarian’s current computer desktop with mobile devices, or not to replace the desktop, but purchase mobile device to supplement the desktop. Here are the recommendations and consensus decision from the group:

If mobile technology is a desktop replacement:

- Recommend purchase of a tablet. The MS Surface Pro over the MS Surface. More powerful, can run more apps, can use remote desktop.
- Include docking station with larger monitor and keyboard, so staff can have the mobility of the tablet, but also the functionality and productivity of a desktop with the larger monitor and keyboard.
- Include external drives for more storage and portability.
- Mirror image the tablet to include ASU apps (i.e., VPN and remote desktop) and network drives and network printing.
- Need to factor possible Surface theft or loss.

If the mobile technology is a desktop supplemental device:

- Recommend purchase of a tablet. MS Surface 2. Runs MS Office natively so fits well with librarian workflow; Word, Excel; PowerPoint.
- Have option of allowing library staff pick their tablet device; options can include Apple iPad or Android tablets. Suggest implementing a voucher system where Librarians can buy their device. Voucher should at least cover the minimum.
- Mirror image the tablet to include ASU Apps (i.e., VPN and remote desktop) and network drives and network printing.
- Need to factor possible Surface theft or loss.

Ultimately after using both the Surface and the Chromebook for four months, the group of librarians unanimously agreed that mobile technology is necessary for librarians to remain productive in their day-to-day work. With regard to a head-to-head competition between the Chromebook and the MS Surface, the group agreed that tablets are the clear winner. Although Chromebooks are less expensive, with a better keyboard and precise touchpad, the lack of built-in productivity apps, less portability, and lower quality monitor make the MS Surface tablet a more useful choice for librarians.

Benefits of mobile technology are obvious from the pilot; however, there are challenges to implementing in enterprise and the library. It is more challenging to secure the technology, both in and outside the university network. What if the tablet or Chromebook gets stolen or lost? New policies would have to be put in place to manage these new devices and ensure librarians will have secure access to the university network and files, like requiring passwords on start-up, or enabling encryption. Library and university IT would also have to balance users’ needs to access corporate app stores (both MS Store and Chrome Web store), and provide safe and secure access to the university’s sponsored apps, and network. Mobile technology could benefit staff in an enterprise system, and lead to increased staff productivity and work satisfaction in today’s mobile working world.

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