



Foos: Microsoft Surface Pro for the mobile attorney

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By Robert Foos Jr.

If you're like me you eagerly anticipate the next big thing in mobile computers. The market is flooded with laptops, tablets and hybrids all claiming to offer something new or different than other versions. One such device that caught my eye was the Microsoft Surface Pro. I had an iPad that I had been attempting to make work as a viable laptop alternative for my mobile computing needs and had found it lacking. I don't mean to disparage Apple or the iPad, but despite some good attributes it just did not fit my needs, mostly because it was incapable of running Microsoft Office.

I purchased the Surface Pro in September and have been using it as both my primary office computer and my mobile computer. Don't let the size of the device fool you, it is a fully capable laptop computer with a footprint slightly smaller than a manila envelope. It has a USB input that allows you to connect to a docking station and power a full-size monitor, speakers, wireless keyboard and mouse. There is also an input for a micro card for additional storage.



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The Surface Pro also allows users to choose between the Windows 8 "live tile" interface (the tiles are constantly updating content) and the more recognizable Windows 7 "desktop" interface. The Surface Pro also has touchscreen capability making the transition from iPad less daunting. I've found the touchscreen to be very similar to the iPad in the ability to resize the screen by pinching and pulling.

Users are able to download software directly to the device, including our firm's practice management software (Practice Master). You can also download Windows 8 versions of various applications from the Microsoft Store. A couple that I find particularly useful are Evernote (a note taking program) and ShareFile, which allows me to access files on our server remotely.

Surface Pro also may be used as a tablet by disengaging the keyboard from the computer itself, or by simply folding the keyboard behind the computer. It is a bit larger and heavier than an iPad but the functionality remains relatively the same.

Overall, I believe the Surface Pro is superior to the iPad as a work computer and a permanent replacement to a more traditional laptop. However, it does have its flaws, and I am not fully convinced it will prove a viable long-term solution to my mobile computing needs.

The most glaring issue is the lack of a cellular data option. My work takes me to places where WiFi

connections do not exist and it is imperative that I be able to send notes, photographs and email to clients immediately after an investigation. The iPad with a data plan was ideal for these situations and is far superior to tethering the Surface Pro to my cell phone and dealing with lengthy delays in sending and receiving information. Document scanning is another area where the iPad is superior to the Surface Pro. I can never seem to get a good photograph from the scanning applications on the Surface Pro, whereas I never had an issue with the iPad.

Another weakness which I believe has been addressed in the second generation is the inflexibility of the support stand on the Surface Pro. It is fine to use on a flat desk or tabletop, but with only one locked position it can be ergonomically challenging when trying to type with the Surface Pro on your lap. It also makes it more difficult to use on those tiny airplane tray tables (which is where I am typing this).

Those are the main issues I found with the Surface Pro as a work computer. However, others may find the lack of options in the applications store and the relatively small amount of available memory to be issues as well. Be assured the Surface Pro can access music, play videos, connect via Skype and a whole host of other things that today's mobile attorney requires, but if you want to play some of the more popular online games or download your bank's mobile application, you may be left wanting.

My complaint with all currently available mobile solutions is the inability to provide an easy-to-use solution for accessing data remotely.

The iPad offers several applications that work like Windows' terminal server, but using the applications and maneuvering inside the application is tedious.

I believe the Surface Pro is a functional replacement for the traditional laptop, and I will continue to use it until a suitable replacement comes along. But it falls just a bit short of also adequately replacing the iPad. Perhaps the Surface Pro 2, which offers a data plan and multiple locking positions, could be an adequate replacement, or perhaps something even more versatile may come along. •

Robert R. Foos Jr. is a partner at Lewis Wagner LLP where he concentrates his practice in transportation litigation. His practice often involves being called to accident scenes where the use of technology to collect and transmit witness statements, accident scene photos and document scans is required. The opinions expressed are those of the author.