



Microsoft Surface Pros and Cons

Transitioning to an All Tablet Workplace

If you're among the increasing number of companies wondering how to give your employees even more flexibility and mobility, you might be considering giving up desktop and even laptop computers in favor of an all-tablet workplace. Three of our clients decided to make that transition in the last 18 months, adopting a significant number of Microsoft Surface Pro tablets. Their results—which have been decidedly mixed—may help you decide whether a similar move is right for you.

Financial Advisory Firm With About 70 Employees

Most of the company's employees used two computers regularly: a workstation at their desks and a laptop when working remotely. Managing, maintaining, and synchronizing a variety of different types of devices was costly and inconvenient. More critically, all the devices were aging and needed to be replaced to protect both security and performance. In addition, the firm had moved into a new "open concept" space with fewer assigned offices and more gathering spaces where employees could work individually or in groups as needed, so portability was a high priority.

When Xantrion suggested standardizing on a single device that employees could use both in and out of the office, the firm's top executives selected the Surface Pro 3 tablet with external peripherals including docks and keyboard covers. Deployment began in late 2015, then expanded slowly throughout 2016. While a few employees are still using the Surface Pro 3, 80 percent of the staff standardized on the higher-performance Surface Pro 4 as soon as it came out.

Today, Client #1 has eliminated desktops and laptops in favor of an all-tablet environment, making it easy for employees to move freely throughout the workspace. The company is happy with the tablet's portability, affordability, and optimization for Microsoft's industry-leading productivity applications.

Non-Profit Foundation With About 30 Employees

The foundation's highly mobile employees spend most of their days moving between their offices, in-house conference rooms, and client sites. They wanted something even smaller and lighter than a laptop for ultimate portability as they take notes, use line-of-business software, and make presentations.

The foundation began in mid-2015 with a month-long pilot program involving a handful of employees, then migrated the rest of the staff over roughly three months. This required the foundation to integrate tablets that shipped with Windows 8.1 into its existing environment, a process that required Xantrion to tweak the organization's security and access policies to ensure it could continue using existing printers, monitors, and other peripherals.

Today, the foundation has been using tablets alone for roughly a year. Although it likes the portability and flexibility of the Surface Pro 3, it is dissatisfied with ongoing problems connecting reliably to external monitors, which sporadically fail to reconnect when tablets are redocked. In fact, the company has decided to invest in laptops rather than upgrade to next-generation tablets when its current hardware warranty runs out.

Biotech R&D Firm With an Office in Michigan and About 40 Employees in Their Menlo Park Office

The Menlo Park office has a mixed environment of laptops, desktops, two Surface Pros, and seven Surface Books. The Surface Books are a little larger than the Surface Pros. They are designed to attach to an included keyboard unit, but also have an external dock like the Pro's, and ship with Windows 10.

For those using the Surface devices, their experience is very similar to that of Client #2—the portability is advantageous when travelling between offices and other locations. One user in particular often takes advantage of tablet-mode to work desk-free during lab trials.

Unfortunately, they also exhibit reliability issues relating to external monitors and randomly locking up, resulting in lost work and productivity.

- User #1 has experienced chronic issues with external displays, where the Surface Pro and/or its dock (both of which have been replaced, along with the external displays themselves, as part of troubleshooting) would repeatedly drop the video connection for an instant.

A few other users in the same office had reported similar behavior, which eventually abated, but User #1 continues to experience this.

- User #2 and User #3 have experienced two kinds of locking up.



Many companies are considering forgoing desktop and even laptop computers in favor of an all-tablet workplace.

- User #2's Surface Book would randomly drop to a sort of "Windows busy" screen. In order to get back to work, he would need to force a restart, resulting in loss of unsaved data.
- User #3's Surface Book would actually freeze to a black screen. This temporarily abated after installing firmware/driver updates, but the behavior has since returned.
- Staff in the Michigan office have experienced similar issues with their Surface devices.
- Users #1 and #2 were migrated to new units as part of the troubleshooting process. This involved migrating all of their data and reinstalling their applications on the new units, which was a considerable disruption to their workflow on these days.

Because of these ongoing problems, Customer #3 is now researching alternatives, including a Dell convertible laptop/tablet, with a focus on reliability.

Our Verdict

To its credit, the Surface Pro tablet is lightweight, highly portable, and easy to dock and undock. When docked or using a keyboard cover, it's as easy to type on as a laptop, with the added benefit of a touchscreen with high-definition display. The Surface Pro is also more affordable than all but the least expensive notebook computers. In addition, it makes sense to adopt a tablet that has been optimized for the mobile versions of Microsoft's market-leading productivity applications.

That said, all clients have reported ongoing issues with external displays and other peripherals, particularly with the Surface Pro 3. We have also seen repeated problems reconnecting to multiple monitors when undocked tablets are returned to their dock. Rebooting the tablet sometimes fixes the problem, but occasionally, the problem persists until the dock itself is replaced. Firmware updates from Microsoft correct the issue, but not consistently. In addition, the warranty that comes with Surface tablets is not as good as what you get with a Dell laptop. With a Surface tablet your typical recourse is to ship the device to a depot or to bring it to the local Microsoft store.

We also aren't convinced the Surface Pro 3, in particular, is a reliable piece of hardware. In one batch of ten tablets shipped to Client #1, three tablets had issues right out of the box, an unusually high failure rate. Client #2 has had to replace several tablets that were damaged in situations that would not have affected a more rugged mobile device. Both have reported that keyboard covers and other peripherals stop working in a relatively short timeframe.

Finally, we recommend that our clients use the newest versions of any operating system to ensure they have the latest security protections and patches. Because the Surface Pro 3 is not certified to work with Windows 10, that leaves clients using the tablets with a choice between upgrading and experiencing performance issues or not upgrading and risking their network security. The Surface Pro 4 ships with Windows 10, which eliminates this concern.

In summary, we understand the appeal of a tablet-only environment, but we do not recommend our clients go tablet-only if the Surface Pro 3 is the tablet in question. Talk to one of our experts about the Surface Pro 4 or another tablet that offers a good balance of mobility, functionality, and security. Otherwise, if portability is your top priority, we recommend choosing one of the superlight laptop or notebook computers now on the market instead.



The key to a successful tablet-only business environment is striking the right balance between flexibility, compatibility, reliability, and security.

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