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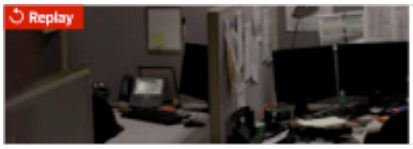

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Don't Skimp on Notebook Refreshes

Consistently refreshing your notebooks is a must, and the process doesn't have to be painful.

by Karen D. Schwartz (/author/karen-d-schwartz) posted **Feb 22, 2011**

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Delivering the latest industry intelligence and financial services at a moment's notice is the primary mission for the staff at Montgomery & Co. That's why the investment bank's IT director **keeps a sharp eye on how up to date, responsive and reliable the company's notebooks are**.

Tony Diaz refreshes notebooks about every three years at investment bank Montgomery & Co.

Credit Robert Houser

There are two major user groups within the Santa Monica, Calif., company: Analysts rely on market data applications, which require larger screens, while executives rely mostly on Microsoft Office. The executives need lighter units with broadband cards.

IT Director Tony Diaz says he refreshes users' notebooks about every three years. **"We start thinking about our requirements about six months in advance of a refresh, and we always focus on weight, memory, screen size, dependability and service,"** he says. "First, we figure out the requirements for each user group, and then trial the top contenders among the groups to narrow it down."

Diaz joined the firm about two refresh cycles ago when the company was using IBM ThinkPads exclusively. Diaz had a hard decision to make because Lenovo (http://www.cdw.com/content/brands/lenovo/default.aspx) acquired the ThinkPad line of notebooks from IBM and he was concerned about continuity. He decided at that time to go with another manufacturer, only to turn around three years later and go back to Lenovo.

"I've always felt that the ThinkPad was the workhorse of the industry," Diaz says. "I went with another vendor, and they failed miserably, and Lenovo has proven itself. They never miss a beat."

The latest refresh, which occurred in May 2010, standardized all notebooks on the Windows 7 64-bit architecture with Microsoft Office 2010 (http://www.cdw.com/content/brands/microsoft/office.aspx). Executives now use Lenovo ThinkPad X201 (http://www.cdw.com/shop/search/results.aspx?key=Lenovo+ThinkPad+X201&searchscope=All&sr=1&Find+it.x=0&Find+it.y=0) units, while analysts use Lenovo ThinkPad T410s (http://www.cdw.com/shop/search/results.aspx?key=Lenovo+ThinkPad+T410&searchscope=All&sr=1&Find+it.x=0&Find+it.y=0) machines.

Get User Feedback

IT Authorities, a 30-employee managed services provider based in Tampa, Fla., has a similar setup. It also has two distinct notebook user groups within its workforce, and handles each separately.

BizTech Quick Poll

On average, how often does your company refresh its desktop and

Field and project engineers who travel to employee sites to diagnose network problems need up-to-date units to keep up with their ever-changing diagnostic toolsets, and large screens for diagnostics. Today, they use a mix of HP Compaq 8710p and EliteBook 8530p notebooks running Windows 7.

notebook computers?

52% Every 3-4 years

20% Only when a system no longer functions or can't be repaired

18% Every 5–6 years

8% Only when the budget allows

2% Every 1–2 years

SOURCE: CDW poll of 384 *BizTech* readers

Sales staff and executives **don't require the latest and greatest feature set because they access many applications from the cloud, but they need thin and light notebooks for traveling**. Today, they use predominantly the HP ProBook 4510s, running a mix of Windows Vista and XP.

"Our two user groups have very different needs, so we treat them very differently," says CTO Tom Beckman. "Our engineers are on an 18-month to two-year refresh cycle because they need the fastest processors available, and our sales staff and executives are on a three-year refresh cycle."

For both groups, Beckman distributes a questionnaire about three months before a refresh is due to determine the tools most heavily used and which ones they need.

Beckman says he ends up buying something in the midrange of what the questionnaires dictate, but some features are a must no matter what the user group. That includes Intel vPro technology, which Beckman says provides a significant advantage in terms of remote power management.

Future Success

For Lindsay Dofelmier, co-owner of Urban Agent Team in Boise, Idaho, mobile technology is critical to success. The seven-person real estate company, which relies more on social networking and other progressive technologies than do typical real estate companies, currently uses HP Mini notebooks (http://www.cdw.com/shop/search/results.aspx?key=HP+mini+notebooks&searchscope=All&sr=1&Find+it.x=0&Find+it.y=0).

Dofelmier led the charge when the company was formed in 2008, buying an HP Mini 110. Her associates followed, buying either the 1101 or the HP Mini 5101 notebook PC.

"We were looking for something lightweight, where we could conduct business, have video conferences and run our finances," she explains. Although most employees are independent contractors who buy their own notebooks, Dofelmier expects that to change over the next few years as the company grows to about 40 people. At that point, she says, she and her business partner are considering providing agents with notebook PCs as a competitive advantage.

When that happens, Dofelmier will look to standardize on one platform, which she believes will help agents communicate more effectively. She's also looking at new technology to make her agents more productive. One option she's considering is a tablet PC for easier electronic document signing.

Finally, she wants solid, reliable performance, something she gets today with HP. "We focus on sustainability," she says. "We want a product that will give us long life and won't end up discarded after a few years."

Although each company approaches notebook refreshes differently, some things remain the same. Diaz sums it up best: **"Pay attention to what users need, and don't use price as an excuse to skimp,"** he says. "There are ways to economize, like skipping an optical drive because a lot of software is available via the Internet, but skimping on something like memory or a good graphics card is a mistake."

5 Notebook Refresh Tips

It's natural to look forward to purchasing new notebooks for your company, but take these precautions before refreshing your computers.

- **Don't focus solely on price.** If you do, you might give short shrift to other important factors, such as reliability and customer support. And you might skimp on important things, like the amount of memory needed or a good graphics card, which are difficult to add after purchase.
- **Don't blindly stick with one brand.** Try out a few others during your evaluation cycle, because products, features and even manufacturers change over time. And don't be shy about asking questions.
- **Practice due diligence.** If you plan to switch brands, make sure you are doing an apples-to-apples comparison, especially regarding manufacturer support and total cost of ownership.
- **Don't underestimate the loyalty your staff may have for their existing notebooks**. Give them ample time to get used to the idea, and solicit feedback on what they want or need in a new notebook.
- **Make battery life a priority, especially if some of your staffers travel**. Battery life can differ from brand to brand, and from model to model within a brand.

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