



Bits of Blue

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January 2014

January in Tampa

Meeting

Communication in the 21st Century

by
Kevan Sheridan

Wednesday, January 8, 2014

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Tampa, Florida

Meeting Preview: This month's meeting topic is "Communication in the 21st Century" presented by TPCUG Vice President Kevan Sheridan. Bob LaFave will conduct the usual Windows SIG for the first 30 minutes of the meeting.

Editor's Comments

By William LaMartin, Editor, Tampa PC Users Group
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Microsoft Surface Before receiving Merle Nicholson's article on Windows and Alternatives, I was afraid I was going to have to fill the newsletter by myself except for the possibility that Ron Weinberg would be sending me something. So I had started on what would be a fairly long article on the Microsoft Surface Pro 2. But seeing Merle's article, I think I need to change course and write a shorter article explaining what the Surface is, why you might want one and why you might not want one. And Ron's article is being saved for next month.

The Surface and its newer version Surface 2 are tablet computers and run only apps, not Windows desktop programs. They are similar to the iPad with a few additional features such as a full-size USB 3.0 port and an HD video out port. But tablets are not my interest. I want a full-featured Windows computer in a tablet format. The Surface Pro 2 is such a device.

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February Meeting: Ubuntu Linux

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Minutes of the December Meeting

*By Merle Nicholson, Secretary,
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In December of each year, TPCUG members disperse with the usual meeting and hold a banquet. This year it was a week early, December 4th for scheduling reasons, held at Pepin in the open conference table. It was well attended; we ate well and got a chance to talk in a social setting with other members. Thanks to John Witmer for arranging the food and meeting location, and our thanks also to Pepin Distributing for providing the venue. ♦

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The Surface Pro 2 is not simply a tablet; it is a real Windows 8.1 computer. In addition to the Windows 8.1 apps, it will run any Windows desktop program, such as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, Family Tree Maker, Quicken and TurboTax, and Microsoft Office programs such as Word, Excel, and Visual Studio. In short, it will run any program that will run on a Windows 7 desktop computer. Additionally, you have all the tablet-style Windows Store apps that come with Window 8.1, plus the ones that people such as myself write.

My wife and I had gifted both our adult children with the earlier Surface Pro 128 GB devices shortly after Microsoft introduced them. However, I waited and recently purchased the new Surface Pro 2. It has several important advantages over the original. Briefly, it has two additional storage sizes: 256 GB and 512 GB, with 8 GB RAM instead of the original 4. Also, very importantly, it has a much better battery life than did the original Surface Pro because of the new Intel Core i5 Haswell processor it uses. The time that the original Surface Pro would run on the battery was the primary complaint people had, including my son. With the Surface Pro 2, battery run-time is no longer a problem. To see the specifications and pricing on the Surface Pro 2, go to <http://www.microsoft.com/store> and select Surface as the shopping category.

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I like the Surface Pro 2. It is a very compact and powerful computer, but it is not for everyone for several reasons, the first being price. I haven't done much research, but I am sure you can purchase a quite adequate Windows 8.1 laptop with a touch screen for a good bit less than a mid-priced Surface Pro 2 with a detachable keyboard. Then there is the problem of your vision with the small screen. The display on the Surface is superior for a tablet and when running apps, viewing web pages or reading documents you can enlarge what you are viewing by the usual finger gestures. However, if you are running a desktop program such as Photoshop on the Surface screen you are going to have a hard time identifying the small tool icons in the tool box. If I didn't already know where the clone tool or the paint bucket tools were, I would have a difficult time identifying them without using a magnifying glass. Now if you are using the Surface at home, you could just connect a larger monitor. That would give you two monitors, and you could use the larger one for working with programs such as Photoshop. Problem solved, but on the road it is a different matter.

And that brings up another advantage of the Surface over most tablets: It has a full-sized USB 3.0 port, a mini Display port and a Micro SD card reader. You may purchase all sorts of adapters to use with these ports. There is a VGA adapter and an HDMI adapter that you may use to connect the second monitor. There is also an Ethernet adapter you may use to connect to your local LAN to get a faster connection that is available through a wireless connection.

The Surface Pro is really not much different in size from the Apple iPad, being shorter in one dimension, longer in another dimension and slightly thicker and weighing a bit more. But the big difference is that the iPad is a tablet; the Surface Pro 2 is a real computer. If all you need are email, web browsing and apps, then there is no need to pay for the Surface Pro 2. Buy an iPad or Android tablet – or the Surface 2 tablet. But for me, I want a real computer as my portable device, just as I used laptops for portable devices in the past. But now I can get the same functionality in a much lighter and smaller package with the Surface Pro 2.

So the good is that it is a very compact real computer with a wonderful screen, good front-facing and rear-facing cameras with ports to connect peripherals that will do anything your desktop Windows computer will do.

The main downside is the cost, ranging from around bit over \$1,000 with a detachable keyboard and a 64 GB SSD drive to almost \$2,000 with a 512 GB SSD drive. Not cheap. If you want cheap, do what Merle did with his old desktop machine. But instead find an old laptop and put Ubuntu on it. That will give you a cheap portable device – but it won't be touch enabled, it won't weigh only two pounds, it won't run for eight or so hours on one charge and, if you carry around a normal size lady's purse, it won't fit in that.

And at present there is one other downside to the Surface in addition to the cost. In mid-December, Microsoft issued an update for the Surface that caused many Surface owners' machines to experience various problems, a fix for which has not yet been issued. The update was removed from the Microsoft site, but the damage was done. My Surface Pro 2 was one of the affected computers.

For some, the problem was the battery draining even when the Surface was supposedly sleeping, others had different problems after the update. My problem is termed, I think, the Secure Boot Loader Loop where on some boots of the Surface instead of going to a login screen, you are presented with what appears as a very abbreviated BIOS screen with four choices. And no matter what choice you make and then tap Exit, you are brought right back to the same screen. In my case, I can eventually escape. I have spoken with Microsoft, and they are researching my problem. In the interim, I rarely shut down the Surface Pro 2 and instead just let it go to sleep by closing the keyboard cover. ◆



Windows and Alternatives

By Merle Nicholson, Secretary TPCUG
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A startling idea: Chromebook sales were 20% of total notebook sales in 2013. I'm sure even Google – the “owner” of Chrome – is surprised. So I thought it's time to have a look at what is available – kind of a reflection of my own recent activities.

Windows, the one we're all familiar with. I can safely say that until Windows 8, Windows had not changed much in functions or in user interface since Windows 95. It has steadily gotten better; that's obvious. The change to Windows XP and then Windows 7 x64 was dramatic in reliability and in minimizing driver issues and making new devices self-installing. But usability – the day to day launch of an application, using it and going on to the business of what you own one for – had remained the same since 1995. There is a good reason for this I think. It was well-thought-out in the first place, and the 1995 version was a result of a development process – as a graphical user interface – that began, say, 12 or 14 years earlier with Atari, Amiga, Lisa, Macintosh, Xerox Star and of course Xerox PARC.

The details of how to operate application Windows right now is the result of nearly 30 years of minor changes. So we can look at this as “well-developed and mature” rather than “old in the tooth”.

I can personally attest to this since I'm using Google Docs for the first time right now to compose this article, and there is nothing that is unfamiliar. It is a better, more developed version of Word Perfect 6 that I used in 1989.

The point I'm trying to make is that ALL of the alternative computers are alike in all important usable ways.

Windows 8.1 Is the first real change Microsoft has made to the user interface with a tiled screen designed for touchscreens. We're calling it “Tile World” – I

think first suggested by David Pogue of the New York Times. His YouTube videos on the subject are worth watching. This OS is not being adopted by businesses. The loss of XP support by Microsoft this coming April is forcing businesses to replace their old XP OS in favor of Windows 7. It's an expensive migration.

Computers using Windows operating systems have an overwhelming share of the market (new sales) and the existing base. Its nearest competitor is the Apple Mac computer, constituting just 6% and dropping slowly. I'm referring to the personal and business computer market excluding servers.

There is no lack of personal and business software for Windows OS. With a little research you can do very well with no-cost software. Business software is plentiful but more expensive. The virus problem is overwhelming for the non-technical user. I advise non-technical users to bite the bullet and purchase good quality self-maintaining antivirus. Too much of the day-to-day of Windows computers use is technical and a “Social Media” user would be better served with ChromeBook, Linux or Mac.

Apple Mac This uses an OS called OSX (X as in ten). They are available in both desktop, all-in-one and notebooks. They use essentially the same components as Windows machines, but the choices are relatively limited. (Basically they make one model of anything. I say this because if you look at HP, you should find a dozen different 15” notebooks, all configurable, and it's the same for all screen sizes. Then there's a business class . . .)

This limited choice – one model for each size – is a strength because it's not confusing you with choices, and a weakness because there are no choices. No one else makes Macs, and it's difficult to get the Mac OS to work on other hardware (called Hackintosh). Apple enjoys very high profitability because they have a high margin and high retail prices. Since they don't compete and another company cannot compete with them; they're unique. Their investment in software is much less because they support far fewer hardware choices. They enjoy a reliability that's hard to beat for the same

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Internet Picture of the Month



Snowy Egret and White-Tailed Deer

From <http://www.flickr.com>, by Gary Seloff, whose Photostream at Flickr is at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/gseloff/>. Gary takes wonderful nature photos, as this image demonstrates, and he has 7,876 photos on Flickr. The photo was taken at Armand Bayou, which Bing tells me is in Pasadena, TX near Houston. This particular photo is located at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/gseloff/11677373374/>

January's Links

Tampa PC Users Group

Gutenberg Bible

Compensation at Private Colleges

Government Health Care Marketplace

History of the IBM Mainframe

<http://www.tpcug.org>

http://bav.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/icv/page.php?book=arch._b_b.10

<http://chronicle.com/article/Executive-Compensation-at/143541#id=table>

<https://www.healthcare.gov/marketplace/individual/>

<http://www.vm.ibm.com/devpages/JELLIOTT/pdfs/zhistory.pdf>

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reason – limited hardware choices.

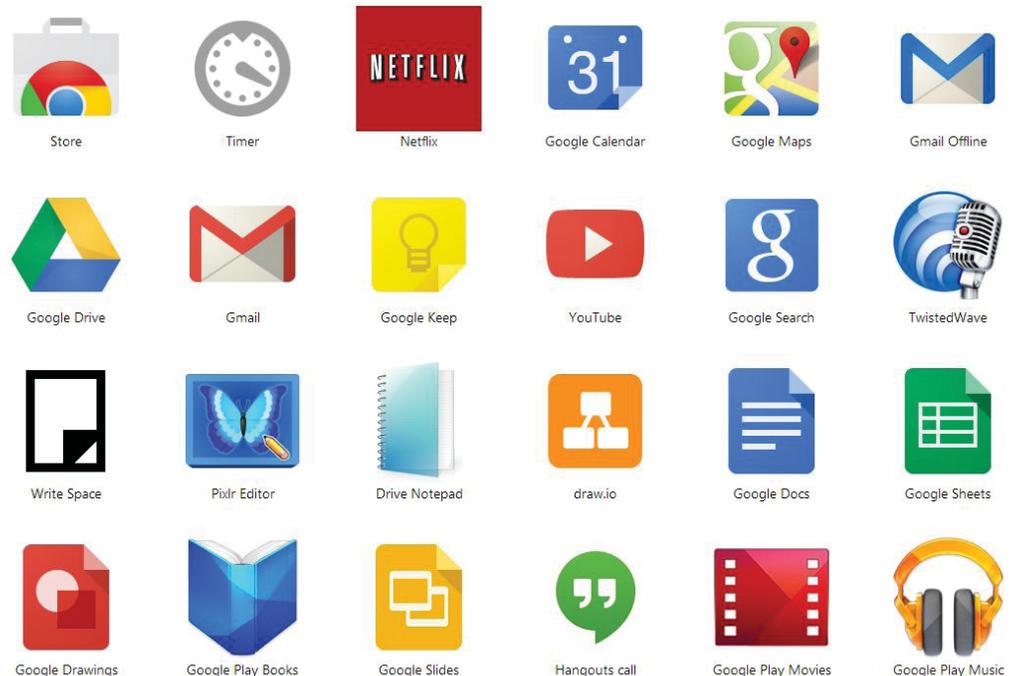
As far as usability – running applications from the desktop, they’re the same. I’ll disclose that I used one only for a few weeks earlier this year but study the subject often. It takes a bit of learning to find everything, but in the end I can do all of the essentials: web, email, photos, documents. But I found if I want to do real work – publishing, movie and photo editing, programming, database development, commercial applications, the number of applications is extremely limited and what is available is expensive. I found printer (and other non-Apple devices) setup problematic. This is my own opinion; I think Apple Mac usability is lightweight but it would suit 90% of the “Social Media” users and none of the people wanting to derive income or use in business. You CAN run Windows software in a Virtual Machine, but I found it slow and difficult (impossible for the non-technical). The Apple hardware is first class; they lag behind the current Intel hardware offerings, not necessarily a bad thing, but if you need real processing power or reasonable pricing, look elsewhere.

ChromeBook (and Chrome-Box). A ChromeBook is a thin, lightweight notebook that uses the Chrome browser as the user interface. There are eight ChromeBook models on the market and one ChromeBox. The prices top out at \$320 for seven of the eight and the one exception can run up to \$1800. All of these are very attractive; slim and light. The largest is 14”, the smallest is 11”. I took a serious look at the HP 14”, and, honestly, until that time I thought the most attractive notebook I’ve handled was the Apple Air, but this is better. Most – not all – have a limited size SSD 16G hard drive. One Acer has a conventional 320G HD. The SSD and the lightweight operating system allow

them to boot in about 10 seconds, and shut down in two.

Models are available with built-in cellular for portable web browsing, email and data. The extra cost is low, but of course you’ll be paying the blood-sucking-phone-provider-of-choice more money every month.

Since the Chrome browser is always on, it does all the Googley things well. All Google accounts have a 5G “Google Drive” where you store most things you need. Obviously you can’t store a music library on that drive. But Google+, Picasa, Google Keep are all a part of this automatically. Google Play Music is available if you need storage for music. The ChromeBooks I’ve looked at have USB ports and SD card readers for more storage, and of course because they’re networked you can transfer pictures from your phone or tablet. If you’re an Android user, phone or tablet, most of this will come naturally. You can purchase more storage for a monthly fee.



If you have Chrome on your Windows PC you can preview what is available on ChromeBook by installing the Chrome Apps in your browser.. I’m using “Docs” right now, and I just completed a fairly large

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spreadsheet project using “Sheets”. On page 6 is an image of what I have installed in Chrome right now on my Windows 7 PC Not shown is Angry Birds and Google Play.

As you can see in the image on the previous page, all the “Social Media” requirements are being met by a standard collection of applications. There are much more available (thousands) than what I have, such as Kindle Reader, Outlook.com, Remote Desktop Google takes a pretty low key approach to announcing new applications.

ChromeBooks are technically Linux (Ubuntu) computers but the base operating system is hidden, just like it is on your phone or tablet. It means that updates are done automatically. If an update requires a reboot it will tell you so just like it does on your smartphone. There is no antivirus available nor is it necessary. The base OS being Ubuntu means that it’s fundamentally secure from viruses, probably not forever.

I have recently looked into a ChromeBook as an alternative for my wife’s desktop. She is getting tired of contending with Adobe flash player updates, Windows updates and pop-ups and warnings of impending doom and threats of viruses. The ChromeBook is as close to meeting all her requirements as anything I can find except for her Quicken application, and there doesn’t seem to be a way to solve that so I’m writing a “Google Sheets” spreadsheet. The big advantage to this is that it is shareable with her Android phone, albeit hard to read.

ChromeBook will probably satisfy all your “Social Media” needs and do it well and quickly in an attractive lightweight notebook with no update and no virus hassles. In a way it’s because it does just the necessary fundamental things very well.

Linux (Ubuntu) I haven’t looked at any distro except Ubuntu, but there are dozens of distributions (called distros) available, all of high quality and most requiring a fair amount of technical skill. The exception seems to be Ubuntu. Their obvious goal is to try to make the OS foolproof to install. As far as I’m con-

cerned Ubuntu has accomplished that. It’s free, as in \$0.00 for an unsupported version.

I think my own situation can be typical. I have an older PC, still running OK that I would ordinarily scrap or give away. It was running – for several years – as a media PC running Windows Media Center and a TV card. Basically it was my TV/DVR. I did have a failure on it that I later identified and fixed. But because it was my TV/DVR I needed to get something running and picked another good PC in my house. So I was left with this thing. By then it had no hard drives, but that was all it was missing.

It happens to everyone, say when your old laptop just isn’t hacking it any more. Ubuntu is a good solution to a weak PC or laptop. It runs on virtually anything. And it runs well with very little memory and very little hard drive space.

I picked a 60G SSD relatively low performing HD that I had in a Windows 8.1 machine. It’s perfect. It’s slow for a SSD, but still five times faster than a conventional drive. I created a startup “Live CD” on a flash drive from the Ubuntu website, and booted from that; I picked the first of two choices – (1) install on hard drive or (2) run from flash drive without installing, and in 30 minutes had a running system. It’s fast – boots from scratch in ten seconds. So far it’s taken all the devices I’ve attached to it: wireless USB WiFi, wireless keyboard and mouse, speakers, monitors. I plug this stuff in; it does a software update and we’re good. It takes all of 5.6G on that 60G drive. The rest is unused.

I look at Ubuntu kind of like I do a Mac. They’re really similar in appearance and usability, and I would rate them fairly equal. Ubuntu does have some advantages in the availability of free high-power, high-quality software. That’s because Linux has a very long history and culture of being open and free. Ubuntu has three things going for it. “Ubuntu One” is a 10G storage “cloud” like Windows Skydrive and Google Drive. Next is the Ubuntu Store where all the free software is. It’s well organized, easy to find by searching and all start installing quickly and with virtually no interaction. Third is a really huge forum and help community

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so that you can get virtually any problem solved. Just use the web; ask the question. It never failed me.

Some TPCUG person whom I will not mention by name, asked how I would run Microsoft Access if I went to Ubuntu – just as a challenge, I expect. I installed a Linux Oracle VirtualBox and a virtual machine manager, then copied a Windows 7 virtual hard drive from my Windows server over to Ubuntu unchanged and ran it. It took two hours to get it right, but I now have Windows 7 running in a Ubuntu window on an old computer, and it does very well. It runs MS Access flawlessly. I did decide to add a second hard drive to accommodate the very large VirtualBox files.

Last thing to mention. I installed the Google Chrome browser in Ubuntu and now I have all the Googley functions that I would have in a ChromeBook as well.

Finally, I think Linux Ubuntu is just as functional as a Mac for everyday “Social Media” functions and has additional advantages of free major applications like LibreOffice. It accepts a wide variety of hardware and is a very viable solution to reviving old hardware that doesn't run that well under Windows. ◆

