

CHOOSING A NEW WORK LAPTOP

(navigating the laptop labyrinth)

THE PROBLEM

The new crop of reasonably priced, fast, light and flexible laptops come with a hidden cost, i.e., they are generally not built to last more than a few years. Just about the time you feel totally comfortable with your laptop, and all your settings and programs are configured to your taste, the laptop will simply die (RIP).

A laptop is indispensable in the current workplace with an emphasis on virtual law firms and remote work. But many lawyers are not tech savvy, and the choices for a new work laptop seem overwhelming. Therefore, what should a lawyer look for when choosing a new laptop?

THE SOLUTION

Focus on 5 key specs for your new work laptop, including screen, processor, RAM, hard drive and battery life (see each “Recommendation” below).

QUICK STEPS

1. Screen (the Display) – Size matters, but screen resolution is equally important.

First, pick a screen size (measured diagonally) that suits your eye sight, desired portability and work habits. 17” is quite large for a “portable” laptop, 15” is standard, and 13” is the smallest practical screen for a work laptop. Note: 12” and 11” laptops fall into the “ultra portable” category, i.e., perfect for travel but not ideal for serious work over long periods of time.

Next, pay attention to the screen resolution, which is similar to any modern TV. The more total dots (pixels) on the screen the better the clarity. For example, 1920x1080 resolution (full HD) is crisper than 1366x768 (HD). On higher resolution displays, the

text, web pages and other applications appear “smaller” and you might have to adjust the system settings to enlarge the default font size, icons, windows attributes, etc.

Recommendation – Visit a store with laptops on display so you can ensure the screen size and resolution fit the way you work. 1920x1080 resolution is the sweet spot for most 15” laptops. The screen (display) is one of the most important components in your new laptop, so choose carefully.

2. Processor – Newer and faster are better, but not everyone needs a super powerful laptop.

Current Windows and Mac laptops use Intel processors, which makes comparisons fairly straightforward, as follows:

- The Core i9 is super-fast and probably overkill unless you work with graphic design and multimedia. Quite expensive.
- The Core i7 is very fast as well and is considered top of the line for most work laptops. Somewhat expensive.
- The Core i5 is very respectable and efficient, and the i5 is the de-facto mid-range processor for work laptops. Reasonably priced.
- The Core i3 will handle all common business tasks but this processor is the slowest chip in the Core family. Inexpensive.

Note: Check that the processor is part of the latest generation (the newest) in that processor family. For example, a 10th generation processor (2020) will be faster and more efficient than the comparable 9th generation (2019).

Hint: Beware of bargain price laptops that have older processors, unless you are looking for a bargain without regard to processing power.

Recommendation – Purchase a laptop with a 9th or 10th Generation Core i5 processor. It will easily handle every task in the virtual law firm.

3. Random Access Memory (RAM) – RAM is measured in Gigabytes (GB), a standard measure of storage.

Think of RAM as the total available space on your desk – once you run out of space, you must close some books and put away some notes before opening anything new, and that takes time and energy. RAM works the same way.

If you work with multiple browser tabs and a few open applications while listening to music and conducting Zoom calls, go for a lot of RAM. 4 GB is anemic, 6 GB is low, 8 GB is standard, 16 GB is amazing, and anything more is excessive for your typical work laptop.

Adding RAM is also the easiest and cheapest way to improve the performance of your laptop. When you search for laptops, pay attention not just to the total RAM, but also how many (if any) open RAM slots are available. Additional RAM is inexpensive, easy to install, and a true performance booster. But many new laptops do not have any open slots for RAM and/or have RAM that is not upgradable. Caveat emptor.

Recommendation – 8 GB of RAM is like a 4-cylinder car... it will get the job done but you might notice the lack of power, especially under certain conditions. 16 GB of RAM is practical, future proof and ideal for your new work laptop.

4. Hard Drive – The “new” technology hard drives and Cloud storage make all the difference.

Conventional wisdom holds that with hard drives, bigger is better (more storage). Inexpensive / older technology hard drives (called HDD) have huge capacity, but are slow and loud, and they drain battery life. It is common to see laptops with 1 or 2 TB of HDD storage, which can hold tens of thousands of documents, photos, songs, etc. Keep in mind that the typical work laptop would probably never use 1 or 2 TB of storage unless personal multimedia files (video, music, photos, etc.) were also stored on that device. And HDD laptops take minutes to start or re-boot (they are slow).

However, hard drives using the latest technology (SSD) are super-fast, ultra-quiet

and energy efficient. Unfortunately, these new SSD hard drives are still expensive, and 256 GB storage is fairly common on a mid-range laptop. These SSD hard drives can still hold thousands of files, but it is important to note that a 256 GB SSD is more than enough storage for the typical work laptop. In addition, SSD laptops take less than a minute to start or re-boot.

With the introduction of inexpensive Cloud storage (think Dropbox or Google Drive), any work laptop with access to the internet has an almost unlimited storage capacity, which makes the newer technology SSD hard drives more practical (store your law firm files in the Cloud instead of on your laptop).

Recommendation – Purchase a laptop with an SSD of at least 256 GB (and make sure your firm uses Cloud storage).

5. Battery Life – Longer is better but beware certain laptop features that drain battery life!

All new laptops have decent battery life (a few hours or more). If your laptop has almost continuous access to an outlet or portable charger, battery life is less of an issue. However, if you travel frequently or attend long meetings off-site, battery life is critical.

Laptops with SSD hard drives conserve battery life, while HDD hard drives kill your battery life. Similarly, most new laptops do not include a DVD player, but for those that do, the DVD drive will quickly drain your battery.

Finally, laptops with the best displays and resolutions will drain battery life more quickly than standard displays. That clarity, brightness and responsiveness come at a price.

Recommendation – If you travel for work, do some research on your target laptop and find out how many hours the battery will last in a typical work day; many web sites are dedicated to providing this information.

PRO TIPS

- ✓ Consider purchasing a tablet instead of a laptop. A keyboard paired with a new tablet can equal or exceed the power, speed and flexibility of a laptop.
- ✓ If you plan on using an external monitor (a 2nd display), ensure that the laptop has the appropriate port, as applicable, e.g., HDMI or DisplayPort.
- ✓ Remember that super expensive laptop with the amazing display? If you crack the screen, the laptop will become a giant paper weight. Consider purchasing a protection plan.
- ✓ The considerations herein apply equally to Mac and Windows laptops.
- ✓ Chromebooks are viable alternatives to Mac and Windows laptops (and are usually much less expensive) only if: 1] you have constant internet access while working, and 2] your work applications are all web/Cloud based, e.g., Google Apps, Dropbox, Clio, MyCase, Lawmatics, MailChimp, Gmail, Microsoft 365 for the Web, etc.
- ✓ Purchase a laptop with a Backlit Keyboard if you work in low level lighting or even in the dark.
- ✓ Ensure your laptop is always plugged into a decent power surge protector. Read again.
- ✓ The latest generation Core i3 processor is comparable in speed/power to the previous generation Core i5 processor, and the latest generation Core i5 is comparable to the previous generation Core i7.
- ✓ Purchase a Touch Screen laptop only if you will take advantage of that feature. Consider this option as a personal preference and be advised that not all laptops have a Touch Screen option, e.g. none of the current Mac laptops offer a Touch Screen.

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