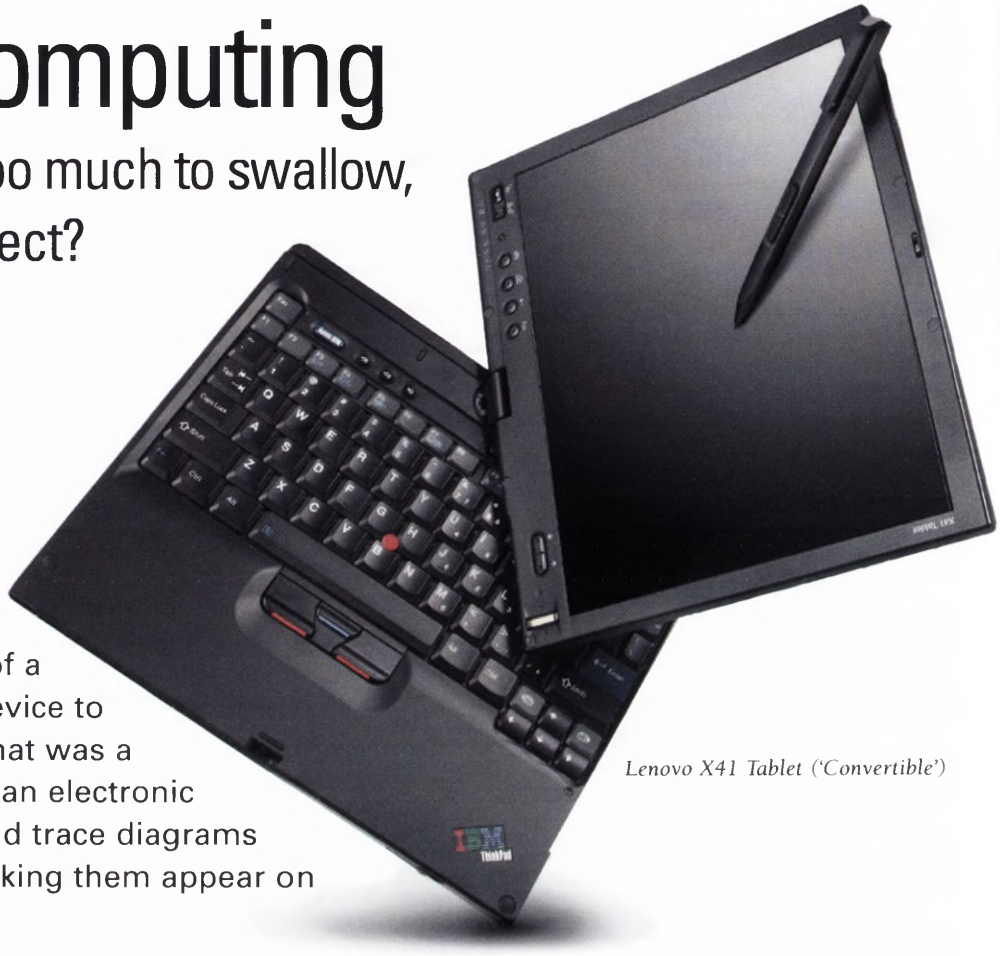
Tablet Computing

Good medicine, too much to swallow, or the placebo effect?

By Rob Laird



Lenovo X41 Tablet ('Convertible')

The concept of the tablet computer has been around for many years. My earliest recollection of a 'tablet' was an add-on device to an Apple II (circa 1979) that was a square plastic plate with an electronic pen attached so you could trace diagrams and pictures, thereby making them appear on the computer screen.

However, its utility for the average punter has been more than suspect in all but the most arcane situations. Has anything changed in this new millennium? Can lawyers obtain any benefit from this technology? If you stop to consider that most of us carry around the equivalent of a 1980s supercomputer inside our mobile telephone, things must be getting better – hold that thought.

I can start by saying that tablet computers are not hugely popular yet, but I am going to fearlessly predict that they will become much more so. They have recently been referred to as 'bling for your lap'. Industry sources claim that almost 10 million of these things will be sold worldwide by 2008 – not much in the grand scheme of things, but more impressive is the expected increase of 700% from 2005!

Most people know someone who has been bitten by the personal data assistant (PDA) bug – Palm Pilot, XDA, Blackberry, etc. But if you speak to the owner of one of these devices in a weak moment, they will admit that they still have a laptop computer, and probably a desktop computer as well.

WHEN IS A TABLET NEEDED?

PDAs would appear to be too small, and not really suitable for 'real' work. They are a useful tool as a combination mobile phone, address book, calendar, and maybe for your most recent email, at a pinch. However, most would probably agree that you need a real computer to do real work – which brings me back to tablet computing.

Tablet computers offer the best of all worlds with a minimum of compromise – they are small, light, powerful, have extra features, and some work like a normal laptop with a normal keyboard as well. You can do real work on these – even in confined spaces or on the 'the go'.

ANATOMY OF A TABLET COMPUTER

A tablet computer is defined as such because of its combination of hardware and software. The most popular operating system for tablet computing today appears to be Windows XP Tablet PC Edition, and there are more than a dozen tablet PC hardware manufacturers – including serious players like Acer, Fujitsu, Lenovo (still wearing the IBM Thinkpad brand), HP, Panasonic and Toshiba.

TABLET HARDWARE

There are two basic types of tablet computer:

1. The 'slate' or full-time tablet is always in tablet mode and has no hardware keyboard. These are light and very chic,

but you must be very good at the pen-based interface as you have no other option.

2. The 'convertible' is a normal-looking laptop but has a touch screen that does a back-flip with half-twist, converting it into tablet mode. Obviously you can use a convertible just like a normal laptop if you choose. This system gives ultimate flexibility, especially for the neophyte crossover person who can't live without the keyboard.

So what is different about tablet computer hardware? The major difference is the touch screen and the lack of keyboard (in tablet mode). Menus are navigated using a pen device, and data is entered using special software tools that come with the device. The user can rest the palm of the hand on the surface of the screen without eliciting complaints from the program, so the writing posture is quite natural. Some tablets have extra buttons and switches to allow typical Windows functions, such as the legendary three-finger-salute CTL-ALT-DEL to be accomplished without a keyboard (imagine trying to press in three different places on the screen at one time using just one pen...)

TABLET SOFTWARE

A key feature determining the usability of the tablet is the special edition of Windows XP, Tablet PC Edition. For those familiar with XP, it is best described as a slightly extended version of what you already know and love. Special software allows you to write with the pen and convert your handwriting into text.

There are also some other special programs that allow you to take snapshots of what you see on the screen and add freehand notes. This is quite a nice feature once you get used to it. Of course, all of these benefits can be integrated into the standard set of Microsoft Office products – Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc.

SIDE BENEFITS OF TABLET COMPUTING

As our world gets smaller, so do airline seats – anyone else noticed that recently? In fact, I am living proof that people will gladly trade their big, heavy, high-speed wide-screen laptop for a small light unit simply so that they can write emails on typical Australian cattle-class flights without having to adopt the fully articulated lotus position with half-pike.

Tablet computers are small and light, but be warned – if you are a graphic designer or you watch high definition movies for a living (some lawyers do moonlight) – the screens are not high definition. If you are like me and you write emails, read and write reports, look at artwork, write presentations, mess with spreadsheets, make appointments, track client contacts, etc, then you will appreciate the normal-ness of a 'convertible'-type tablet computer and, when appropriate, you'll also love the fancy features of freehand mark-ups and hand-writing recognition.

So why does tablet computing work now and not before?

1. The massively powerful processors that drive the immensely complex software are now available in extremely small packages that generate little heat and use little power.
2. New millennium materials are readily available (carbon fibre, titanium magnesium) from which to build the strong 'bullet-proof' cases to tightly house and protect the intricate components.
3. High-tech batteries offering long work times are now affordable in these machines.
4. The tablet software is built on Windows XP, giving the product a huge headstart in functionality and reliability.
5. Tablets are very easy to learn and use – thanks mainly to Windows XP functionality.
6. The touch screens are accurate, robust, and cheap.

VERDICT

'There's nothing an agnostic can't do if he doesn't know whether he believes in anything or not' – Monty Python

If you are on the move and like to work on the move, get yourself a tablet computer – they are both good medicine and a placebo. On your next trip, even if it doesn't save you much time, you will look and feel much better for having 'taken the tablet'.

Expect to pay between $2,000 and $4,000 for a decent tablet computer. Not long ago they were more like $6,000. ■

Rob Laird *is Director of Business Development at LawMaster.*
PHONE *(02) 4572 8699.* **EMAIL** *rlaird@lawmaster.com.au*

MORE INFORMATION

Microsoft – information about Windows XP Tablet PC Edition – plenty of links to HW and SW partners from www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/tabletpc/default.mspx
Lenovo (IBM) – information on the X41 Tablet (Convertible) www-8.ibm.com/lenovoinfo/au/thinkpad/tablet/index.html