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Much of the buzz of the past few years has been over the continuing paperless practice movement and the phenomenon of “cloud computing.” Pretty much everyone knows the meaning of paperless; it’s basically self-explanatory. The term cloud computing, on the other hand, may seem somewhat mysterious.

This article isn’t a primer on that concept; a few of our writers have already addressed it (see www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/2259 and www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/1967). But I will give my two cents of explanation on the term: It’s essentially the next phase of web-based computing. Much as Web 2.0 expanded that definition, cloud computing aims to put virtually everything we do online, including specialty tax and accounting systems, general office programs (like Word and Excel), data storage, collaboration tools, and pretty much everything else.

There is no doubt that the software side of things, including “cloud-based” programs, is turning out some exciting and innovative new concepts that will greatly affect tax and accounting practices and businesses in general. But hardware continues to play an equal role to software, providing the actual tools with which they interface. Quite obviously, without a physical device and keyboard, the software would do little good. There are those who argue the converse point, of course (re: Chicken vs. Egg).

But I’m a gadget man. I like to feel a keyboard and hear it click. I like my smartphone that lets me run errands or hit golf balls while still being connected to my work email and applications. I love sleek monitors. I like digging into my desktop PC once a year; not to figure out how it works, but to figure out how to make it work better.

Even those not so gadget inclined can surely see the value that basic hardware makes

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MULTI-SCREEN MONITORS

People have been promoting the use of multiple monitors for years, especially in a few key professions (especially financial and accounting). The benefits include a dramatic increase in productivity, and that's not just taking the word of the companies that make these multi-monitor displays.

Research shows efficiency boosts of up to 40 percent, plus I've talked to several real-life accountants who love the systems in their practice, especially during tax season and for write-up. With two monitors, you can have your tax prep system on one screen and source documents on another, aiding data entry and review. With three monitors, you can also view tax research or a spreadsheet. I recently spoke with a professional who uses four-screen displays at his 10-person practice, which he says greatly streamlines virtually everything he does.

DoubleSight Displays — \$550-\$750

DoubleSight (www.DoubleSightDisplays.com) offers dual-screen monitors in 17-inch and 19-inch sizes (approx. \$550 and \$750, respectively) that come mounted on a stand that takes up only the desktop space of a single monitor. The stands are also available separately, which allows people to use the monitors they already have. DoubleSight uses Sony LCD monitors, and its products are also available at Dell, Staples and other online tech retailers.

Digital Tigers — \$499 – \$1,300+

Using Samsung LCD monitors, Digital Tigers (www.DigitalTigers.com) has a wide range of multi-screen systems, including options with anywhere from two to eight monitors with screen sizes from 17-inch to 30-inch. Some of the more popular designs include a two-monitor 19-inch system for \$499, a triple 19-inch for \$999 and a four-panel view with two above and two below priced at \$1,389. Each of these uses

a single reinforced monitor stand to preserve desktop space.

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Top Pick — ScanSnap S300 Color Mobile Scanner — \$299

The ScanSnap S300 (www.scansnap.com) is the smallest double-sided scanner with an automatic document feeder. The company actually promotes it as a “mobile scanner,” since it is very compact and uses a simple USB 2.0 interface. But the small device packs a few excellent features, including one-click scan-to-PDF, bookmarking, search and other document management functions.

Samsung — CLX-3175FW — \$399

Samsung's (www.Samsung.com) wireless 3175 multi-purpose device offers great convenience (no need for network cords running everywhere), while also giving users full-color laser printing, 20 page-per-minute scanning, automatic document feeder, fax and copy functions. The 3175 also has one-button options for printing, copying and scanning directly to a USB flash drive

Dell — 2135cn Multifunction Color Laser Printer — \$439

Dell's 2135 (www.Dell.com) provides a great full-color laser option for desktop multifunction devices. The device has high monthly duty cycle capabilities (40,000 pages print), and also offers scan, copy and fax functions. It also has a web-based remote configuration tool and a toner management function that notifies the user to reorder.

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With the continuing focus on digital processes (the paperless movement), scanners have become a central hub of this effort. Digitizing client documents makes them much easier to store, search, filter and use (especially on a multi-screen monitor). And since most tax preparation vendors are also adding some form of auto-populate or at least auto-organize/workpaper compilation functions, scanners are essential to making use of these innovations. For firms with a dedicated administrative staffer who collects client documents up front, a centralized group scan workflow may be the best method of processing these items.

Epson WorkForce Pro GT-S80 – \$799

The latest in Epson's WorkForce line (www.Epson.com/workforce), the sheet-fed GT-S80 offers 40 page-per-minute scanning and duplex (both sides) in one pass. A 75-page document feeder aids with tasks, and a daily capability of 1,800 sheets means the machine can handle the full workload of most small practices or be used as a desktop device for high-volume individuals at larger practices.

Fujitsu — FI-6130 Sheet-Fed Scanner – approx. \$950

In addition to its desktop/mobile ScanSnap, Fujitsu (www.Fujitsu.com) offers several workgroup and heavy production scanners, including the new FI-6130 Sheet-Fed model. The 6130 scans up to 40 pages per minute with 600 DPI resolution, and includes a 50-sheet feeder tray, duplex capabilities and Adobe Acrobat Standard.

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MOBILE HARDWARE

It seems there are only a few stalwarts left who've managed to maintain a firm line between "work time" and "non work time," and unfortunately I'm not one of them. While I salute these valiant few, for the rest of us there's a wide market of mobile gadgets, ranging from traditional laptops and the latest generation of smartphones that help us stay connected, to devices that let users perform additional tasks while away from the office, like mobile scanners, printers and other tools.

PORTABLE SCANNERS & PRINTERS

In addition to Fujitsu's ScanSnap S300 noted previously, there are a few other micro peripherals out there that can help you input or output information while on the road, with some not even needing to plug in since they get their power from the cable attached to your laptop or phone.

Ambir Technology — TravelScan Pro 600 – \$150

Barely wider than a sheet of paper and less than two inches in height and depth, Ambir's (www.Ambir.com) 11.6 ounce TravelScan 600 can quickly scan business cards and documents up to 8.5 x 14 inches. The lightweight tool uses a regular USB cable for both data transfer and to get its power, and can save straight to PDF format.

Planon — PrintStik and DocuPen – Starting at \$199

Planon (www.Planon.com) has taken portable scanning and printing to the extreme, providing pocket-sized options that can work with a PC, Mac or even mobile phones. The DocuPen can scan a full page in about four seconds, with full

color resolution. And it has built-in flash storage that can hold hundreds of

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allowing users to quickly set up their portable computer in a more comfortable workstation-like setting. The folding keyboard offers full-sized keys and number pad, while the iRizer laptop stand can be set to various angles to ease viewing. Matias' products are PC and Mac compatible and are available at Staples, Office Depot and dozens of online retailers.

Hardware

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