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Like many of the contributors from this publication and its executive editor, I spent a week at the annual Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Nevada in early January. This is a time for the various technology-related companies to show off what they have been working on to members of the press and others.

I saw several new innovations that were noteworthy and will most likely write about them in future columns. However, one piece of technology stood out in my eyes as having the most possibilities, especially for the accounting profession, which is rapidly moving to a less-paper environment. I'm speaking of Microsoft Surface (codenamed Milan), which is releasing this year. Although it was officially unveiled last May, this was my first chance to see it close up.

### **What is Microsoft Surface?**

Microsoft Surface is the first commercially available surface computer from Microsoft Corporation, which turns an ordinary tabletop into a vibrant, interactive surface. Think of it as a much larger version (30-inch display in a table-like form factor, to be exact) of the Apple iPhone. It provides effortless interaction with digital content through natural gestures, touch and physical objects.

Initially

intended for restaurants, hotels, retail and public entertainment venues, according to Microsoft, this experience will transform the way people shop, dine, entertain and live. Several retail and hospitality giants have already committed to this

product, including Harrah's Entertainment, Starwood (Sheraton) Hotels

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beneath it. And when the meal is over, placing your credit card on the tabletop will generate an interactive way to not only pay the check, but to also add the tip and divide the bill.

### **How did Microsoft Surface come to market?**

It's been a long road. In 2001, Stevie Bathiche of Microsoft Hardware and Andy Wilson of Microsoft Research began working together on various projects that took advantage of their complementary expertise in the areas of hardware and software. In one of their regular brainstorm sessions, they started talking about an idea for an interactive table that could understand the manipulation of physical pieces. Although there were related efforts happening in academia, Bathiche and Wilson saw the need for a product where the interaction was richer and more intuitive, and at the same time practical for everyone to use.

This conversation was the beginning of an idea that would later result in the development of Surface. And over the course of the following year, various people at Microsoft involved in developing new product concepts, including the gaming-specific PlayTable, continued to think through the possibilities and feasibility of the project. Then, in October 2001, a virtual team was formed to fully pursue bringing the idea to the next stage of development; Bathiche and Wilson were key members of the team.

In early 2003, the new Consumer Products Group, led by David Kurlander, presented the idea in a group review to Bill Gates, Microsoft chairman. Gates instantly liked the idea and encouraged the team to continue to develop their thinking. The virtual team expanded, and within a month, through constant discussion and brainstorming, the first humble prototype was born and nicknamed T1. The model was based on an IKEA table with a hole cut in the top and a sheet of architect vellum used as a diffuser. The evolution of Surface had begun.

A variety of early applications were also built, including pinball, a photo

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who was part of the development team eventually tasked with taking the product from prototype to a shipping product. Surface prototypes, functionality and applications were continually refined. More than 85 early prototypes were built for use by software developers, hardware developers and user researchers.

### **How does this interesting new interactive retail experience benefit consumers?**

It certainly has the potential to break down barriers between people and technology and provide a more interesting interaction with digital content. Consider how ATMs changed how people got money from the bank. Surface has the potential to change the way people interact with everyday digital content.

### **More importantly, how could this possibly apply to the practice of accounting?**

Again, I invite you to imagine the experience a client has when they visit your office. With more of their information moving to a digital format, I can see a device like this deployed in firm conference rooms where practitioners regularly meet with clients. Now before you get too excited, consider that initially these units will cost around \$10,000, which for frugal-minded accountants may be completely out of the question. However, if you're looking for a way to distinguish your firm and potentially bring significant publicity to your services and how they're delivered, it's not beyond the realm of possibility.

Surface Computing is part of Microsoft's recently formed Productivity and Extended Consumer Experiences Group, run by Corporate Vice President Tom Gibbons, and is within the Entertainment & Devices division. According to Gibbons: "Our first partners come from the leisure, entertainment and retail industries, and Surface has the potential to span many other industries."

So don't be surprised when you read or hear about a Surface device deployed

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