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it's all about the hardware. Gadgets big and small, as well as computers, monitors and other tools make technology real and touchable. Here are a few hardware items that can benefit professional practices.

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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

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that may not have been thoroughly vetted for productivity yet, but that look promising or at least have that “Wow, that’s cool!” factor.

Finding the ones that help you do your job more efficiently can help you be more productive in the office or out. Here are a few that I think deserve some attention in this regard.

AT YOUR DESK

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

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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.

SCANNERS/PRINTERS & MULTI-FUNCTION DEVICES

While small, mid-sized and large practices obviously have varying workflows and some differences in technology needs, many find the same products to be useful. A practice with fewer than five professional staff, for instance, may not need a high-end dedicated printer and scanner and will find the use of multi-function machines on their desktops to be useful. Many large practices, even though they have those high-volume devices, find it more productive to also keep a scanner/printer/copier at individual desks in order to reduce time spent away from the workstation.

Fujitsu

— ScanSnap S300 Color Mobile Scanner – \$295

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,

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Wireless 3175 multifunction 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.

DYMO

— **LabelWriter Twin Turbo – \$139**

Whether a one-person shop or a larger practice, somebody has to print mailing

labels, and it can be a headache trying to print them on an inkjet or regular printer. But DYMO's (www.dymo.com) line of specialized label printers

makes the job much easier and efficient. The Twin Turbo even allows two

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FOR THE WHOLE OFFICE/WORK GROUP

HIGH VOLUME SCANNERS

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.

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KODAK

— i210 Scanner – \$799

KODAK (www.kodak.com) has

transitioned well from a photo-oriented company to a digital imaging technology

vendor, and its document scanners offer good features and capabilities. The sheet-fed i210 moves at 30 pages per minute and can scan virtually any size image, from ID cards to documents up to 34" long. The Smart Touch feature makes scanning directly to email, file or other programs quick and easy, with

output available into multiple file types, including searchable PDF.

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

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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 documents. The PrintStik

brings printing convenience to those on the go; can print from laptops, computers

or smartphones; and doesn't need its own power supply. This is a handy tool for those air and road trips.

ONE MORE USEFUL TOOL

Matias

— **Complete Mobile Office – \$130**

The Matias (www.Matias.ca)

Complete Mobile Office bundle combines a folding keyboard, a folding laptop

stand and an optical mouse with retractable USB cord, allowing users to quickly

set up their portable computer in a more comfortable workstation-like

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