computing ecosystem to compete with Apple and Google.

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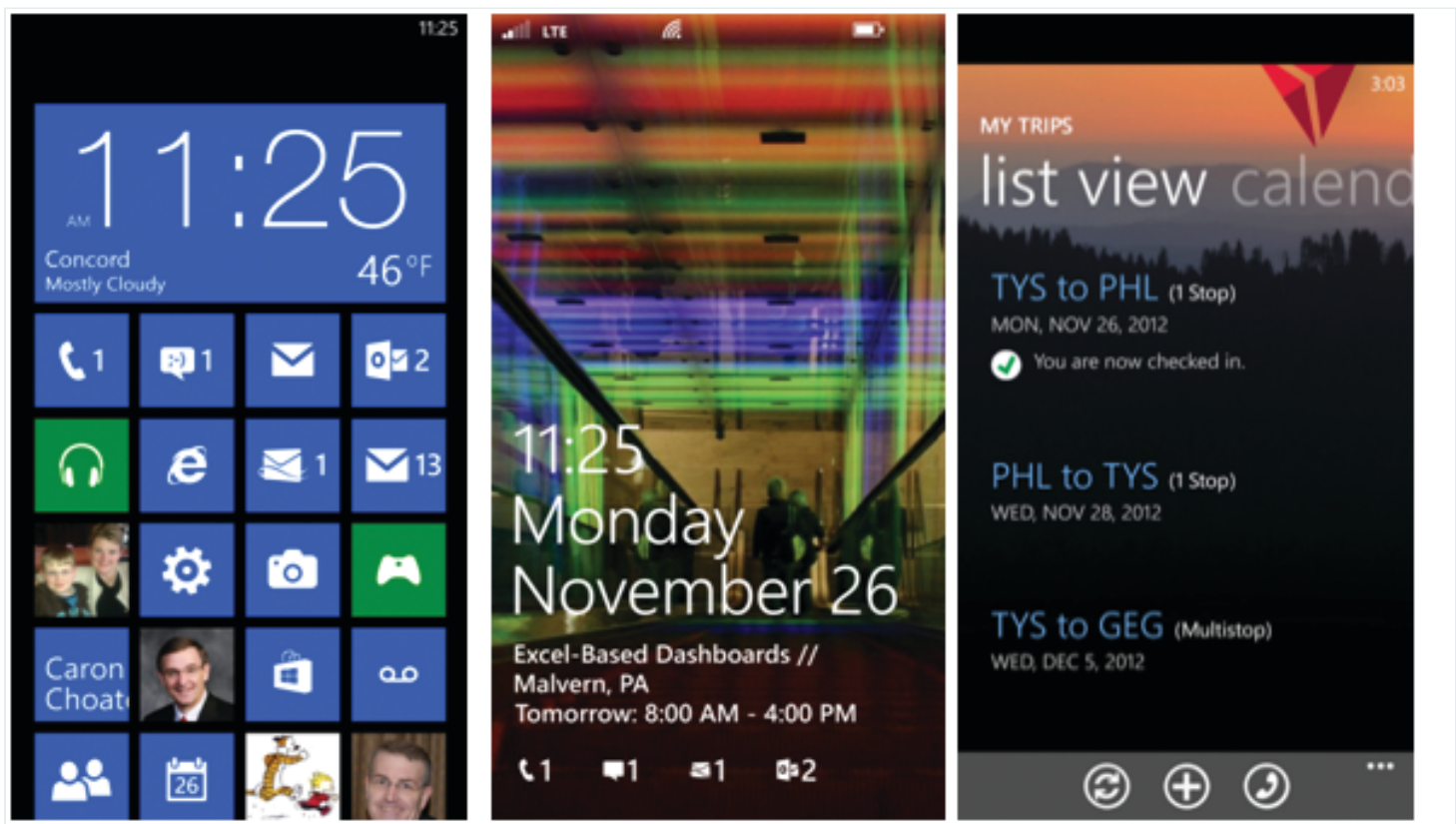
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While much has been written about Windows 8, the latest version of Microsoft's personal computer operating system (including my article at bit.ly/bftwin8), the most important releases are Windows RT and Windows Phone 8. Microsoft has done a good job of creating a credible ecosystem to compete with Apple's existing ecosystem and Google's emerging ecosystem.

These ecosystems are described in the table below, and represent the approach of each company to providing software, services and devices in four major areas: mobile

phones, tablets, personal computers and television/gaming.

products and services again, but in many ways, Microsoft has been more innovative than Google and Apple in the last two years. Windows Phone 8 is attractive, easy to use, available on most major mobile networks, and has beautiful phones like the HTC 8X. Windows RT is available on well-designed devices like the Microsoft Surface RT, and has a full version of Microsoft Office 2013, including Word, Excel, PowerPoint and OneNote (but not Outlook). Both operating systems work seamlessly with Microsoft's personal cloud services such as SkyDrive, Windows Live Calendar, and Outlook.com (formerly Hotmail/Live Mail), as well as major social networking tools like Twitter, FaceBook and LinkedIn.

I have personally worked from both of these mobile operating systems over the last few weeks (using an HTC 8X Windows Phone 8 device on Verizon and a Microsoft Surface RT 64 GB tablet), and the operating systems have features which are compelling to both novice and advanced users.

Windows Phone 8: HTC 8X

The HTC 8X is a thin and light smartphone running the Windows Phone 8 operating system. The hardware is fast, thin, light, and has good battery life. The user interface uses the so-called "Metro" interface implemented in Windows 8, which allows users to create a visual "dashboard" of their communication activities as a replacement for the Start menu. Users create and arrange "Live Tiles" which show a summary of new activity associated with the program, and are also used to launch the applications when they are selected.

Figure 1: Windows Phone 8 uses interactive "Live Tiles" to display key information and launch apps.

For example, when you receive new mail, the number of messages you have not seen appears as a number on the live tile for the selected e-mail account. The phone live

tile lists the number of missed calls since you last opened the phone app. Users can

minutes. The startup wizard guided me through adding all of my accounts, requiring only usernames and passwords to configure all but one of my accounts, and seamlessly transitioned me from my Android phone to Windows Phone 8.

One common argument used against Windows Mobile is that it lacks software. The selection in the Windows Phone App Store is more limited than the broad selection available in Apple's App Store and on Google Play. The Windows Phone 8 platform has many of the top iPhone and Android apps, and requires some services to be accessed using a web browser instead of a native application. While services like Pinterest, Google and Pandora do not have free Windows Phone apps, there are third party apps available at minimal cost.

Windows RT: Microsoft Surface RT

Windows RT is a special version of Windows 8 launched in late 2012 which runs on ARM processors that are normally used in consumer electronics devices like DVD players, smart phones, and printers. Although Windows RT looks identical to Windows 8, it requires all software to be purchased from the Windows Store and cannot be a centrally administered "member" of many business networks (e.g. a domain).

The Microsoft Surface RT (32 GB $499, 64GB $599) is a well-designed, attractive piece of hardware. The device is light, yet sturdy, with a bright high-resolution screen, and has an acceptable battery life for most users. There are expansion ports supporting USB, HDMI, and VGA connections (some require purchasing an adapter), support for Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, as well as other accessories like keyboards and mice.

The best feature of Windows RT is the included versions of Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and Microsoft PowerPoint. The Microsoft Office experience is as

good for routine document and spreadsheets as the full version running on Windows

writing, including a credible PDF editing tool. I could access almost everything I needed online using the included Internet Explorer 10 browser and the remote desktop application.

Conclusion

Microsoft has made a huge step forward with Windows RT and Windows Phone 8 to extend its computing ecosystem with new Microsoft operating systems for smartphones and tablets. Windows Phone 8 is strong enough that my non-technical wife and I independently selected the HTC 8X as our personal cell phones. Accounting professionals should evaluate Windows Phone 8 alongside Apple iOS and Google Android when they renew their smartphone contract.

I am more guarded with Windows RT, and believe that it will take a number of months for the software catalog to add many of the needed solutions. It is clear that Microsoft has changed its approach to provide more compelling mobile devices, and only time (and sales) will determine the long-term success of these platforms.

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