

Business & Careers

Trend of multiple monitors continues to grow



Luigi Benetton
Hi-Tech

Five monitors sit on Peter Aprile's desk. He uses the three on the left when he's on the treadmill under the left side of his stand-up desk. When Aprile sits, he pivots the middle monitor and clicks an icon on his desktop to create a similar three-screen setup on the right side of the desk.

"It took some imagination," says the president of Toronto's Counter Tax Lawyers.

That imagination makes him a poster boy for lawyers who use multiple monitors at work.

The trend towards multiple monitors has taken hold in many law offices. "To truly be able to work in a paperless environment you

need to recreate the paper environment," says Dominic Jaar as he lists materials traditionally found on a lawyer's desk: a notepad, case law, mail to scan and act upon.

Jaar printed a lot when he first started working. Screens were smaller and not easy to look at for long.

"I wanted to be paperless, but I didn't feel comfortable," says the Montréal-based partner and national practice leader for KPMG Canada's information services.

He credits advances in screen technology, like Apple's Retina Displays, for enabling people to read screens more comfortably.

Attitudes may not have caught up to technology, though.

Jaar still hears people say they can't read on a screen. He chalks this up to people of his generation and older having used print for learning and screens for entertainment.

Younger generations experience the opposite: they learn from screens and often use paper to consume entertainment.

"I bet that in a few years, we'll be told most of the new generation can't concentrate when they read on paper," Jaar says.

Monitor usefulness surpasses that of non-

digital desktops. Jaar multitasks when he shares an application window or screen during Skype for Business sessions.

"Instead of being locked in one screen where everybody sees everything you do, you can show one monitor and you're free to do what you want on the other monitors," he explains.

"You need at least three monitors," Jaar opines. "Four is not a bad idea." In Jaar's office, his touchscreen-equipped notebook sits in a dock from where it drives two external 24-inch monitors (one horizontal, the other vertical) and a MIMO Touch that he uses to track real-time activity on Twitter, RSS feeds and other "ticker-like" information.

David Canton switched from two 24-inch monitors to a 32-inch one. "If you do the math, a 32-inch monitor has about the same number of square inches as two 22-inch monitors," he explains, and "it takes less space on your desk."

Counting the screen of his Surface Pro, the London, Ont.-based business lawyer at Harrison Pensa LLP figures he has about as much screen space as two 24-inch models would offer.

When monitors proliferate, monitor arms become de rigueur. They enable people to adjust their height, pivot them from landscape to portrait and move them out of the way.

Both Jaar and Aprile use Humanscale monitor arms, while Canton opted for a 3M model.

In most cases, lawyers can "lower expectations" when shopping for monitors. Canton found reviews of monitors tend to be written by gamers whose requirements exceed those of the typical lawyer. Canton's rhetorical question to their performance criteria: "Who cares in an office environment?"

ViewSonic's senior product marketing manager, Kenneth Mau, offers several basic specifications to search. He recommends a minimum size of 24 inches, minimum resolution of 1920 by 1080 (also called 1080p, or HD) and a 60 hertz refresh rate, which are sufficient "even for movies and most media applications."

While monitor shopping, Canton found

that choice diminishes and prices rise out of proportion with increases in screen size. "When you compare specs to some of the cheaper ones, I don't know why they're so expensive," he says.

A computer's video card affects the type and number of monitors one can consider. The standard computer at Aprile's firm, the HP ProDesk 600, sports two-port video cards driving mostly 24-inch monitors.

"You find a system that works and you replicate it," he says.

Aprile took longer to find that setup for himself. His particular arrangement demands: an AMD FirePro W600 video card; "some daisy-chaining;" Monitor Profile Switcher software to switch between sitting and standing setups (all three lawyers interviewed for this article use stand-up desks); and ongoing debugging.

Aprile's multiple-monitor setup necessitated a better video card. So do monitors that surpass HD resolution, as Canton learned when he connected his 32-inch screen to his late-model desktop computer last fall.

He found the monitor unusable, so the IT department replaced its card with a better model and the cabling with Mini DisplayPort to fix the issue.

Software may also affect monitor choice. The day before we spoke for this article, Canton attended a webinar hosted by document management system iManage to address the software's inability to work on monitors with resolution higher than HDMI.

"Our IT department did some creative workarounds to get it to work properly, but those caused other issues," he says.

Screens emit blue light that can disrupt people's sleep if they work long after sunset. The author currently uses software called fLux that automatically reduces blue light on his monitors when the sun sets.

Monitor manufacturers now build such enhancements into their products. ViewSonic, for instance, now offers pre-configured "view modes" like "text mode," which creates a sepia-background paper-like experience on screen.

Manufacturers also build flicker-free technology to make looking at monitors a less tiring, headache-inducing activity.



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