
Macs not right for everyone

Experiences from a real world pilot

By Dale Vile, September 2008

In a nutshell:

The Apple Mac is gaining popularity, but unlocking its value can be challenging for businesses.

Key points:

- The benefits of switching to the Mac are clear for developers and creative workers
 - Yet mainstream business users often struggle to articulate the value precisely
 - A real-world Mac pilot by Freeform Dynamics revealed some significant challenges
 - While switching to Mac might make sense for some businesses, for most it will not
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The story goes that once you have experienced the Mac, there is no going back. Time and again, we hear this line from recent converts to Apple's competitive offering to the traditional PC/Windows combination.

When you talk to developers and media guys, they can give you good solid reasons for the switch, and there can be no question that the Mac operating system, OS X, and some of the tools available for this essentially Unix-based environment, offer benefits if you are into code cutting and heavily creative activities. Many consumers too seem to like the platform, as the Mac presents arguably a cleaner and simpler environment for the home/recreational user.

What's interesting, however, is when you ask everyday business users who have converted to the Mac about why they did it. The answers that come back are then usually quite woolly, and often degenerate into "It's just better at everything than Windows" or "It just makes me feel more creative". When pressed, such users find it difficult or impossible to articulate precise benefits.

If you push the conversation, you get into the discussion of security, anti-virus, etc, but these are IT issues in most business environments that are pretty well understood and reasonably easily managed on Windows nowadays, and likely to hit the Mac community at some point anyway. The conversation then gets really confused when talking about "office functionality" – email, word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, etc. With the world and his dog essentially standardised on Microsoft Office for business, how does the average Mac user in a mainstream commercial setting handle that? Well, they typically run a copy of MS Office in a Windows virtual machine using Parallels or VMware Fusion. Most say they flip to this to do a lot of their more 'boring' work such as messaging and collaboration via the Exchange server, and participation in the document production/review/approval cycle with colleagues, clients, suppliers and so on, then do everything else in OS X. Of course the big question then becomes what does "everything else" actually translate to – accessing corporate applications and the Web through a browser probably – i.e. things that the desktop OS has little bearing on.

I am generalising here, of course. Some manage with Apple's iWork Office suite and live with the reduced functionality and file formatting/exchange challenges. Others buy a copy of Microsoft Office that runs natively on the Mac, which probably offers the worst of both worlds. For some, they simply don't have a need to interoperate with the Windows world in very big way so they use whatever native applications they like.

Despite the confused views, behaviour and apparent contradictions, however, Mac converts are typically very forceful, at least emotionally, about defending their move, regardless of the type of user they happen to be. So there's clearly something interesting going on here.

Acknowledging that I might be thinking about things too logically and relying too much on values and assumptions arising from years of Windows usage, I concluded that that there was at least a possibility that I was missing something intangible that Mac users just 'get'. So, a few months ago, I bought a Mac, started to experiment with it, and ultimately instigated a pilot of Mac OS X in my company (a small industry analyst and research firm) to see how well it would support our core business activities.

Fast forwarding to the result, of the five Macs we have invested in (one MacBook and four MacBook Pros), two are currently sitting here waiting to be repurposed as Vista machines, and the others have been set up to allow Windows to be used for core business purposes (either via dual boot or virtualisation), but still allowing access to OS X for experimenting and maintaining a working knowledge of the operating system for research purposes.

So why was the pilot not successful?

The answer is actually pretty simple – we found that as a business, we were far more reliant on Microsoft Office under Windows than we had anticipated, and while most of the other productivity and business apps we use had native Mac equivalents, this was not true for all of them. The end result was that we couldn't get away from Windows, so ended up with a hybrid Windows/OS X environment which got in the way of productivity.

At this point, I can hear all of those converts out there screaming about how great the integration is between Windows and OS X if you use the latest virtualisation offerings, and some of the stuff that can be done is indeed very clever. In Parallels, for example, you can put the system into 'coherence mode', which basically means that Windows applications are surfaced individually in OS X. Rather than having to flip between your Windows and Mac environments, you can essentially live in OS X and fire up Windows applications from within it. VMware Fusion achieves the same result through its 'unity mode', and both virtualisation solutions (latest beta in the case of Fusion) allow native Mac applications to be set as defaults for actions under Windows. As an example of the latter, you can set up the environment so if you click on a link embedded in an email received in Outlook, the native OS X version of Safari or FireFox is invoked. Similarly, if you click on a document attachment, it will open in the Mac version of Office, PhotoShop or whatever other application is relevant based on the file extension.

We were really excited when we got all this working in with both Parallels and Fusion (we piloted both). With the integrated hybrid environment running pretty flawlessly on the bench, we thought we had a workable system that that would allow us to test the claims about OS X superiority from a usability, experience and productivity perspective, and still run the Windows stuff we need in order to operate as a business.

After a few weeks of trying this for real, however, two pretty significant problems surfaced. The first was performance, with users complaining that delays in opening new windows, switching between applications, etc were a distraction. This was true even on the MacBook Pros with 4GB of memory, 2.4/5 GHz dual core processors and high end graphics cards. The second issue was the user experience delivered by hybrid environment itself. Mixing two UI conventions is simply not as smooth and productive as one or the other used alone. Sure you get used to differences in key mappings, special keys, and the way in which minimising, maximising and closing windows works as you flit between apps, and it even becomes subconscious after a while, but it is far from ideal.

The end result is that users found it much more convenient to run Windows in full screen mode for core business activities, though even then some complained (particularly those who do a lot of task switching) that performance was not as good and the experience not as smooth as their old

Windows machines. When we realised that as a result of the above, most of us were spending 90% of our time in Windows because everything just hung together and worked together better that way, we called the pilot to a halt.

The whole experience can be summed up with the feedback from one of the users involved in the pilot who just happens to be a level-headed woman with no interest in gadgets, image, etc - "I would say Macs are just different, not better, but either way, I am really glad to have my old [Vista] machine back as I can get things done twice as quickly with that and with no distractions. Everything works together properly again".

So given our experiences, would I recommend against using Macs in a mainstream business environment? Well no, but I would urge anyone considering a switch to do their homework, and be honest about their dependency on Windows applications. For productivity applications in particular, the truth is there is nothing on the Mac that even comes close to Office 2007, especially if you are an Exchange shop and make full use of Outlook, or do anything beyond basic word processing (formatted documents, macros, fancy presentations, etc) and need to exchange documents with non-Mac users. This is not just about how comprehensive or mature the applications are; it is also about harmony with the rest of the Windows/Office using business world.

The other piece of advice is to do as we did and run a pilot with real users and assess the pros and cons, beyond the initial novelty phase (in which users are invariably enthusiastic), through a period of extended use. I think the trouble with listening to some converts is having committed themselves to the switch then raved about how great things are in the honeymoon period, they tend to downplay many of the compromises they learn to live with over time. When setting up pilots in larger environments, it will also be important to look at systems administration, monitoring and support, something we didn't spend a lot of time on in our little experiment.

As a final note, it is probably worth me saying that the techie in me still loves OS X for its fundamental superiority as OS over Windows, and while SP1 has now made Vista fit for purpose, I still regard it as an over-engineered and overly complicated platform in general. None of that matters, however, if you look at a potential switch from a user and business benefit perspective in the context of your environment. For some I am sure a move to Mac will be right, but based on our own experiences, I doubt it will make sense for most businesses at the moment if the decision is taken in an objective and informed manner.

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