

More touch-enabled devices expected in future

By Jamie Yap, ZDNet Asia Monday, November 08 2010 07:19 PM

Touch-enabled devices will increasingly become commonplace amid a growing market for applications optimized specifically for touch interfaces that cater to both consumers and enterprise users, across different demographics and industries.

According to Gartner reports published in March and April this year, worldwide sales of touchscreen mobile devices will exceed 362.7 million units in 2010. In addition, these devices would account for 58 percent of all global mobile device sales by 2013.

Gartner numbers also revealed that by 2015, more than half of the PCs purchased for users aged below 15 would be touchscreen-enabled, compared to only 10 percent for enterprise users.

Craig Skinner, senior consultant at Ovum, echoed views that market sales for touchscreen devices will increase, along with greater diversification of such devices, ranging from desktops to tablets and smartphones.

In a phone interview with ZDNet Asia, Skinner also noted there will be more demand for portable touchscreen devices as opposed to "fixed" devices such as desktop PCs, particularly in the office.

He added that the adoption of touch devices may be limited in the workplace.

"A tablet is designed as a consumption device, [where] the applications used in it, like watching videos, only require a few clicks," he said. In comparison, standard office tasks such as typing documents and entering data into spreadsheets are not as efficient or ergonomically comfortable on a touch panel, he noted.

Touch apps for corporations

Despite the limitations in an enterprise environment, Skinner did not rule out touchscreen devices for corporate use. Instead, he predicted that the workers would have multiple devices on their desk--for instance, a PC for everyday tasks, smartphone for calls, and a tablet for off-site presentations. These devices could all be synchronized through cloud services or feature internal, integrated applications such as a calendar or video telephony, he said.

The common denominator among all these office devices is that workers, particularly mobile workers, can access all necessary information at any time, on- and off-site, Skinner explained.

Rather than displace the PC, touchscreen mobile devices will complement the personal computer, he said.

He noted, however, that businesses would only buy touchscreen devices if there were more applications optimized for "touch" use, because only then will the value of owning these devices outweigh their cost.

He said there is a market for such applications, including enterprise-specific ones. Some apps, he said, could be used across vertical industries such as document viewers or editors that are built for touchscreen technology, which not only provide mobility but can also save printing costs.

Skinner added that there could also be industry-niche or company-specific applications in the future, such as customer databases for telecommunication companies or patients' medical records for healthcare services providers.

Wang Ye, assistant professor at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Department of Computer Science, agreed.

He said in an e-mail that developers would want to tap the growing, lucrative market demand for apps optimized for "touch" use. Wang attributed this trend to how the Apple iPhone and iPad have successfully borne early adopters of touchscreens, hence, making "touch" a trend that is continuously "gaining momentum".

Young more "touch native"

Pointing to the Gartner report, Wang added that young consumers would outpace enterprise users in their adoption of touchscreen devices.

He explained that younger users have no attachment to legacy technologies and hence have little difficulty adopting new technology. In comparison, most office workers have already developed "muscle memory" of using a mouse and keyboard and could find it tough to break the habit.

However, he said touchscreen devices have potential among special user groups in markets such as hospice care or active aging such as the elderly or muscular dystrophy patients, who have little strength to strike the keys on a PC.

Jack Jiang, associate professor at NUS's Department of Information Systems, agreed, noting that while touchscreen devices mostly serve consumer needs, certain business industries such as healthcare can benefit from how straightforward and easy these gadgets are to use.

According to an October report from Frost & Sullivan, commercial tech giants are starting to integrate their products, such as tablet computers and smartphones, with capabilities to support healthcare applications that can be used by physicians to provide wellness care.

Keith Lee, senior consultant at Frost & Sullivan, said in an e-mail that touchscreen devices are well poised to serve the growing demand of healthcare applications because of their ability to accommodate and process an exhaustive series of clinical or patient monitoring applications. For instance, the mobility of touchscreen devices is useful for remote patient monitoring, he added.

Pawel Suwinski, principal consultant from Frost & Sullivan, said: "[Touchscreen devices] can be used practically anywhere at the point of care [in the healthcare industry]."

In his e-mail, Suwinski said tablets blend in better with work processes as they have a bigger screensize compared to smartphones or PDAs (personal digital assistants), and allow more accurate and comfortable input and navigation.

But while Ovum's Skinner agreed children would find it easier to pick up the use of a touch panel than a traditional keyboard, familiarity with touch interfaces is not limited to those who use it since birth.

The analyst noted that even consumers not born in the era of social media can adapt and become "touch natives" because a touchscreen is "such an intuitive interface". There is little need for explaining or a user manual, he said, adding that users simply need to "touch the thing [they] want to do".

Touch big for PC giants

Paul Donovan, Asia-Pacific and Japan vice president of product marketing for Hewlett-Packard's personal systems group, said in an e-mail that the proliferation of touchscreens--from self-service kiosks to GPS devices--in everyday life is a sign that many consumers have used, seen or own a product that utilizes a touch interface.

This, he said, helps create significant latent interest in the application of touchscreen technology, which in turns creates commercial demand for multi-touch products and software.

Donovan added that HP, which sells its TouchSmart series of touch-enabled products including the Slate 500 and TouchSmart Web printer, plans to continue developing touch-capable systems and software.

Likewise, a spokesperson from Taiwanese computer manufacturer Eee Pad tablet and Asus Eee PC T91 netbook.

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