Keeping up with the latest gizmos

New Computers for Everyone

Back to school time no longer means just getting some new clothes, stocking up on pencils, paper, and erasers, and worrying about the first day. Here in the twenty-first century, students need modern tools to help them keep on track and compete.

This means it's a good time to consider upgrades. And not just for the kids, but for the whole family. It's no longer just deciding between a Mac or Windows PC. These days, there is a vast range of makes and models to fit every budget, need, and ability.

It's no longer a matter of grabbing the latest or most affordable technologies, either. To make a wise choice of a computer that is the perfect fit, it's necessary to know a lot more than just price.

Know thyself

The most important things to know are about the user. Affordability is of course important, but to get the best match, one needs to know the person's age, why they want a new machine and what they intend to do with it, their environment, and amount of technical knowledge they have or can tolerate.

All these factors are different for everyone. A child learning to read, for instance, has little in common in terms of computers with a graduate student doing research and writing papers; a young adult who mainly surfs, posts to social media and plays games; a telecommuting worker; or a senior who would just like some facetime online with the grandkids.

All of these people may want their own electronics, or, as in times past, the entire family may still depend upon sharing one common box. Fortunately, desktop computers can be configured for different users' needs and easily switched between them.

Grandma may dislike using a mouse and may be much more happy with a touchscreen or need magnification to read, for instance, whereas Junior might just want a fast graphic processor and a game console. The point is that by knowing what everyone wants and needs *before* buying anything can save a lot of money, trouble, and family arguments.

Of course, giving everybody their *own* personal, individually-configured machines could avoid much of that. Inexpensive or older models should not be overlooked for the new shiny machines with all kinds of expensive features that are not needed. As computers today range from handheld devices to those with table-sized screens, and every size and capabilty in between, some research will be necessary.

From pocket-sized to kitchen tables

Smartphones are quite sufficient for many people, especially if quick, easy communication, access to social media, ebooks and maps, and light surfing are all that is required. But they are *not* efficient tools for doing anything seriously productive, like writing term papers or creating art or spreadsheets.

Tablets are like cellphones with bigger screens in various sizes which can be easier to read and work with. They can do more than phones, and are ideal for ebook reading, but they are still limited by less memory and even more by clumsy on-screen keyboards, and may require a stylus for fine art or other work. Plus, outputting files or transferring them to other devices may still be a bit of a problem.

Laptops come in a wide array of styles, prices, and features, and are, of course, *totally* portable. Which also means that just like phones or tablets, laptops can be dropped or stolen. So investments in carrying cases and security methods should also be made. An online backup system such as **SWCP BUS** can not only remove worries of losing all one's files by such mischances, it also makes transferring them to a new computer effortless.

Some, like **Microsoft Surface**, combine the convenience of a touchscreen with the ease of a real keyboard. Lightweight models known as netbooks may be ideal for most high school or college students. However, older users often find using a touchpad instead of a mouse to move cursors frustrating.

Desktops remain *the* classic personal computer, able to do anything others can and more, except that they are not meant to be moved around physically. But PCs are still the standard of the industry with the most software, features, and available options.

The great divide lingers between Windows and Apple, although with **OS X**, Apple says their devices can run MS Office and Windows, while **Windows Live Mesh** allows those machines to sync with a Mac. Files can also be easily transferred through the cloud. But **software compatibility** is still a persistent issue.

There are now machines in each category to fulfill special needs. There are rugged **laptops for kids**, specialized ones for **seniors**, and build-it-yourself **custom systems** for geeks. Many new models come off the shelf with a number of conditions, often involving software limitiations or internet packages that should be carefully looked at before signing to make sure it's what you need.

Things constantly change

Computers keep evolving. Smartphones require apps that look and behave simply, and software in general is similarly mutating to respond to swipes and pokes rather than elaborate drop-down menus and fields to be typed in. Microsoft's popular Word program, for example, which has undergone much evolution (not all of it good by any means) in its latest iteration appears very little like previous versions, making simple tasks that were once effortless for experienced users become learning ordeals again.

Another point to consider is *how long* the machine is intended to be used and what might happen during that period. It's not just those using older Windows systems who have until 2020 before Microsoft's technical support for them ends who should worry. For instance, many graphic artists and others long committed to Apple for its early excellence in design software are now feeling trapped by their loyalty.

New Apple models lack CD/DVD drives – so all the artists' files on disk are now either useless or they must rely on the cloud or external drives for access. Not only that but companies like Adobe who have long provided the essential software to manipulate images and documents have also gone to the cloud, too. So programs that once could be bought, owned, and used independently, are now only available via annual subscriptions and depend on fast, reliable

connections to use. But the costs of switching to a completely different system may be too prohibitive.

Internet connections are yet another factor. Smartphones rely on cellular networks with a tremendous range of conditions, prices, and terms. Tablets and laptops can use local Wifi networks, which while convenient, are often risky when hooking up with an unknown Wifi provider in a public space.

Desktop users are also affected. Windows 10, again, is constantly uploading data back to Microsoft which could slow things down. Upgrading to a faster connection, such as **SWCP Lightspeed** might

 that as well as provide dependable, fast speeds needed to stream movies and use cloud software.

Some tips on staying ahead

1. **Research before buying**. Use comparison shopping sites, check for consumer complaints and read up on new models. Asking friends and other users for their honest opinions can be invaluable.

2. **Don't automatically purchase the latest thing.** Remember that all new hardware and software is often a bit buggy. Plus the newest stuff usually costs more, whereas the best deals may be for those items about to be surpassed. You may not get bragging rights, but you will have something that's been proven reliable as well as cheap.

3. **When you find the perfect computer to buy – don't.** Once you've found that ideal device at a good price from a reliable source, leave the site *before* buying. Today, merchants track consumers around the web. Chances are you'll soon be seeing ads for the same or similar devices, and often at a better price. You might even get a special offer from the seller you were considering.

4. **Upgrade where possible**. Do you *really* need a new box? Or is it just running slow? Chances are all it needs is an update to the operating system, new apps or devices, maybe just all the cruft cleaned out. SWCP can help with all these things. We offer a *free* computer clean-up per year for all our customers, and can install items cheaply too.