Choosing Technology That’s Right for You

Practitioners are increasingly using technology within their practices. For some, computers are used to carry out the basics: communicating via email and finding professional information online. For a growing number, technology is also being employed to streamline scheduling, billing and record-keeping functions.

According to a 2004 survey of practitioners conducted by the APA Practice Organization, more than half of practitioners now use a broadband connection to access the Internet. This faster pipeline is speeding up their ability to use technology effectively.

Another important key to using technology to its fullest advantage is having an up-to-date computer setup in your office.

The first question most practitioners ask is, “What computer setup is right for me?” How much computer you need depends on what you intend to do with it. If you plan to use a computer only for basic word processing, browsing the Internet, and sending email, then the most basic and reasonably priced systems will probably meet your needs.

If you routinely use your computer to run practice management or financial software, to process electronic insurance claims or credit-card transactions over the Internet, or to keep your professional calendar and electronic files, then you might want to consider a computer with some extra features.

If you also plan to use your computer to view video files, download and share digital photographs or music, watch DVD movies and television, or play computer games, consider a better system that includes upgraded memory and video/graphic card features.

Mac vs. PC?

Perhaps the most significant consideration is whether to purchase a PC or a Macintosh computer. Macs are valued by many for their ease of use and graphics capabilities, but because they are less popular than PC computers, there are significantly fewer business software applications (e.g., practice management software) available for Macs than for PC computers.

Regarding price: PCs are generally considered to be less expensive, especially at the low end of the market. However, at the higher end of the market, some Apple models are cheaper than a Windows computer offering the same features.

Is there a right or wrong choice? No. It boils down to personal preference. Just make sure that the software you want to run is compatible with whichever system you decide to purchase.

A Basic System

A basic PC or Mac desktop computer system includes:

- 2 GHz+ Pentium 4 CPU (PC) or 1.42 GHz PowerPC G4 (Apple)
- 512K cache
- 256 megabytes SDRAM memory
- Video/Graphics Card
- 80 megabyte Hard Drive
- Sound Card
- 17” monitor
- Windows XP (PC) or OS X (Apple) operating system
- V.92 56K DATAFAX Modem
- CD-ROM Drive
- 3.5” Floppy Disk Drive (optional, not necessary)
- 2 USB ports
- 2 Serial ports
- 1 Parallel port
- Mouse and Keyboard
- Speakers

A More Powerful System

The next level of system has upgraded versions of everything included on the basic system, plus additional features. This system will work faster, store more data, and with the addition of an Ethernet card, easily connect to a broadband Internet connection as well as other computers in your home or office.

- 3 GHz+ Pentium 4 CPU (PC) or 1.42 GHz PowerPC G4 (Apple)
- 512K cache
- 512 megabytes SDRAM memory
- Upgraded (256 meg) Video/Graphics Card
- 100+ megabyte Hard Drive
- Upgraded Sound Card
- 19” monitor
- Windows XP (PC) or OS X (Apple) operating system
- V.92 (56K) Telephony-capable modem
- Ethernet (network) card
- CD-ROM Drive
- 3.5” Floppy Disk Drive
- 4 USB ports
2 High Speed Serial ports
1 Parallel port
Wireless Mouse and Keyboard
Upgraded Speakers

Additional Features to Consider (for backing up and transferring data):
- CDR Drive
- DVD Drive
- Tape (Zip) Drive

**What can I expect to pay?**
Plan to pay $700 to $1,300 for a basic system. Cost-conscious purchasers can add any additional features to a basic system without having to purchase all the upgrades included in a more powerful system, which can still cost less than $2,000.

**Which software should I consider?**
The most basic need for any business computer user is business productivity software, which consists of programs that help with basic, everyday work-related tasks. The most common business productivity software available today (for both PC and Mac) is Microsoft Office. Depending on the version of Office a user purchases, it can contain word processing, spreadsheet, database, presentation, and email/calendar/contacts software programs that work together easily and efficiently.

The most common business software used by psychologists are practice management and financial management software. Psychologists considering either types of software should first make a list of the kinds of tasks they want to automate in order to determine how best to meet those needs.

Among the tasks that many practice management software programs automate are scheduling, accounting, and billing (see the **Practice Management Software: Features Comparison** box below). Many psychologists also use financial management software alongside their practice management software or by itself. Intuit Corporation’s *Quickbooks* is the most popular financial management software program used by psychologists. A more limited number use Intuit’s *Quicken* or Microsoft *Money*.1

**Where can I go to learn more?**
The trend toward increased computer automation in health care is one that will continue for the foreseeable future. The topics touched on in this article only represent a sampling of the hardware, software, and functional issues that psychologists should consider before beginning the automation process. To learn more about automating their practice psychologists can find additional resources in the “Practice Management” section of APAPractice.org.

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**PRACTICE MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE: FEATURES COMPARISON**

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<th>PRODUCT NAME</th>
<th>FEATURES</th>
<th>Install software or access via the Internet?</th>
<th>Scheduling</th>
<th>Accounting</th>
<th>Billing Paper</th>
<th>Electronic</th>
<th>Formal Training?</th>
<th>Support?</th>
<th>PC/Mac</th>
<th>HIPAA Compliant?</th>
<th>Website</th>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Purchased separately  2 Free resources  3 Add-on services require additional fee(s)  4 Requires use of PC emulator software for Mac  5 Requires connection to electronic claims clearinghouse