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Here Come Tablets. Here Come Problems.

As companies flock to the devices, they're learning a lot from their mistakes

By SHARA TIBKEN

American Airlines was an early adopter of tablet computers. As a result, it learned a lot about how best to use tablets—and where it could go wrong.

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The airline, for instance, figured out early that one device would not fit all. The pilots wanted high-end tablets, to replace paper charts and such, while mechanics and engineers needed something more rugged. For flight attendants, small and light were key. Meanwhile, to its first- and business-class passengers, the airline lent models that played new movies without risk of illegal copying.

"When you're in a conference room, you might think, 'This is great,' " says Maya Leibman, chief information officer for American, owned by AMR Corp., about the airline's effort to choose models that worked for everyone. "But then you get out in the field and realize it doesn't work in a driving snowstorm."

Companies everywhere are adopting tablets. Forrester Research Inc. estimates that about 25% of computers used for work globally are tablets and smartphones, not PCs.

But in the process, companies are making a lot of the same mistakes—from not researching ahead of time how workers can best use the devices, to underestimating the costs and the additional challenges tablets present for IT networks.

Here's a rundown of five of the biggest mistakes, and what companies have learned from them.

No. 1: Failing to have a plan before rolling out the devices

Too many companies start using tablets without a clear strategy.

American Airlines

"There are organizations that throw caution to the wind and say, 'We need tablets,' then buy 20,000, push them out and wait for people to tell them how they're using them," says Chris Curran, a principal at PricewaterhouseCoopers overseeing technology strategy and innovation. This is wasting money and causing lots of frustration, he says.

TO EACH HIS OWN American Airlines quickly discovered that one device wouldn't suit all needs.

Analysts advise putting tablets in the hands of small but key groups of employees before attempting a wide deployment. Let them see what works and what can be done better.

Policy issues should be ironed out ahead of time, too, like who will own the devices and how they will be managed.

"You can't just say, 'Here's a tablet, go forth,' without a plan of attack," Mr. Curran says.

No. 2: Not understanding what tablets are—and are not—good for

Tablets have a lot of capabilities, but they're not right for everything and can't yet replace notebooks for many uses. Many traditional computer programs won't work on tablets, and documents sent from a computer to a mobile device may end up losing some key characteristics.

Apple
CATCHING UP At Hyatt Hotels, management found it needed better tools to manage mobile devices.

"If you send someone files from their desktop infrastructure, there's no guarantee everything in those files will be presented to the end user correctly," says Ken Dulaney, an analyst at Gartner Inc., an IT research and consulting firm based in Stamford, Conn. "And an application that sits on the device might not show them there's something missing."

Some companies try to get around this by using virtual desktop applications, Web-based programs that give users remote access to their PC desktop, but those also don't always translate well to the smaller screen. Hyatt Hotels Corp. says some of its employees with tablets work with such an app but sometimes can't navigate all of the programs without a mouse or keyboard. In addition, most PC programs are designed for larger monitors, making it difficult to read them properly on a smaller screen.

John Prusnick, director of IT innovation and strategy for Hyatt, says the company is considering changing some of its PC applications to make them more tablet-friendly.

No. 3: Expecting to easily obtain all the apps you need

Some companies think it will be easy to obtain the right apps for their needs. But most companies don't have the means to produce and constantly update mobile applications for themselves. And while iPad and Android app stores have many more offerings than the stores of less popular tablets, even those have limitations.

Apple
MAKING IT WORK At Jackson Kayak, it took some time to find the right mobile apps for certain needs.

In Sparta, Tenn., kayak maker Jackson Kayak, which supplies iPads to about half of its 130 employees, struggled early on with finding tablet-specific applications to meet certain needs, such as production management. And apps for some programs it used didn't have the full functionality of the PC versions, such as the ability to upload many photos at once to a blog.

"At the beginning there was a lot we couldn't do," says James McBeath, the chief marketing officer. The company used some iPhone apps at first, which required zooming in on everything to make it legible on the iPad screen. Eventually, however,

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The new iPad offers fast speed and one of the most spectacular displays ever seen in a mobile device, Walt Mossberg discusses on digits. Photo: Getty Images.

Jackson Kayak found almost all of the tablet applications it needed in the app store, Mr. McBeath says. The only app the company had to create for itself was one for customers to learn about its business.

No. 4: Thinking tablets are cheaper than laptops

The $500 price tag for a tablet can seem pretty attractive compared with the prices for notebooks and desktops. But that ignores a crucial element: Tablets have to be replaced more often than PCs.

Software giant SAP AG has distributed about 14,000 tablets to employees and says it will be replacing them about every 18 months to two years to take advantage of the latest software and hardware improvements and if there's a compelling business reason. What to do with the old devices and how many replacements to stock are issues as well. Wireless connections and apps for the tablets all cost money, too.

Printer maker Ricoh Americas Corp., a unit of Japan's Ricoh Co., allows workers to supply their own tablets. It hasn't yet bought products en masse for employees. It's considering rolling the devices out to the company's sales reps but is waiting for tablets to reach the functionality of PCs before distributing them companywide.

"I don't want to pay $1,000 for a laptop and $800 for a tablet. I would much rather pay $800 once and be done," says Tracey Rothenberger, chief information officer at Ricoh Americas.

No. 5: Misjudging the ease of support and security

Putting a lot of data on the devices is necessary for their usefulness, but there has to be some way to make sure that information is protected.

There are issues of control as well. When employees use personal tablets for work, can the IT staff remotely wipe the hard drive if the device gets stolen? Employees also can download thousands of programs on their own, which can be a security nightmare for a corporate network and cause compatibility issues when the company wants to update operating systems and apps.

At Hyatt, there were no security problems, but "the growth of mobile devices broadly outpaced our ability to quickly manage them," Mr. Prusnick says. "We thought we could manage it on our own, but we realized we really needed better tools and support to manage all the devices we have."

To address the problem, Hyatt implemented mobile-device management systems that allow it to deal with multiple operating systems more smoothly and address security, monitoring and technical-support issues more efficiently.

Ultimately, companies need to recognize that tablets are a new breed of devices that require new methods of management. Says Lars Kamp, strategy lead for Accenture Mobility Services, part of consultants Accenture Ltd.: "Don't think tablets are an extension of existing legacy IT systems. They are not."

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