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All-in-One Desktops: Simply Perfect for SMBs

All-in-one systems help businesses realize that a computer's total can exceed the sum of its parts.

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For Eric McCoy, CEO of online footwear retailer Heels.com (http://www.heels.com/) in Charlotte, N.C., the decision to transition his office staff to all-in-one computers was a no-brainer. "It made sense in every respect," he says. "I think they're the wave of the future."

McCoy isn't alone in his appreciation of all-in-one systems, computers that combine both computer and monitor into a single enclosure. Over the past few years, a growing number of computer makers, including Apple (http://www.cdw.com/content/brands/apple/default.aspx?cm_re=Brands-_-FeaturedBrands-_-Apple) , Asus (http://www.cdw.com/content/brands/asus/default.aspx) , Cybernet (http://www.cdw.com/shop/search/results.aspx?ctlgfilter=&wclsscat=&key=Cybernet&searchscope=All&sr=1&Find+it.x=0&Find+it.y=0) , HP (http://www.cdw.com/content/brands/hp/default.aspx) , Lenovo (http://www.cdw.com/content/brands/lenovo/default.aspx) and Sony (http://www.cdw.com/content/brands/sony/default.aspx?cm_re=Brands-_-FeaturedBrands-_-Sony) , have introduced all-in-one computer models, addressing the needs of small and medium-size businesses and other customers who are looking for a simple and fast approach to office computing.

Eric McCoy of Heels.com says all-in-one PCs offer a newer, cleaner look. "Aesthetically they're cool; my employees think they look modern," he says.

"The main benefit is that all the hardware is consolidated into one device, which conserves space," says Rohan Bose, a business computer analyst at AMI Partners, a New York technology research firm. "This is critical for firms who are space-conscious and looking to save room." Bose notes that **all-in-one systems can also help SMBs in several other ways, such as by cutting costs, speeding system setups and simplifying user training.**

McCoy, whose business uses a dozen all-in-one systems — a mix of HP and Sony models — also likes the way the machines blend into the firm's office environment. "It's a much cleaner look," he says. "You have fewer wires sitting around."

Staff reaction to the systems has been overwhelmingly positive, McCoy says. "Aesthetically they're cool; my employees think they look modern," he says. "We try to run a real hip business."

The Right Fit for Small Business

Laura DiDio, a principal at Information Technology Intelligence Consulting (ITIC), a Boston technology research company, says all-in-one systems are an appropriate alternative for SMBs that can't decide whether to use a thin client or a desktop computer. "All-in-one PCs are going to give you a one-stop shop," she says. "They're an inexpensive alternative."

Andrew Marshall, chief technology officer and executive vice president of Campus Technologies (http://www.campustechnologies.net/default.aspx) , a Philadelphia company that markets Internet and media services to student dorms and apartments, also has deployed all-in-one systems. He says they are a great fit for SMBs that need to give their employees more computing power than is possible with a thin client, yet don't want to waste money on a system that far exceeds their users' modest needs.

Like many SMBs, Marshall's team spends most of its working hours on the web. While employees use a web interface to configure and manage customer products and troubleshoot problems, business needs sometimes require them to run word processing or spreadsheet programs. **That's when all-in-one computers, which generally consume the same amount of physical space as thin clients, justify their slightly higher cost.**

"For us, we found what works best: five Asus all-in-ones," Marshall says. "They provide the perfect bridge between a thin client and more expensive conventional desktop computers." Bose notes that while all-in-one systems can be more difficult to repair than

conventional desktop models, many adopters feel that the integrated technology generally requires less maintenance.

Corey Pressman, CEO of Exprima Media (http://www.exprimamedia.com/) , an educational software developer in Portland, Ore., says he switched his office to four all-in-one Apple iMac computers, expecting the new machines to be more reliable than the low-end conventional systems they replaced. He wasn't disappointed, noting that system failures have become virtually nonexistent.

Campus Technologies' Marshall agrees that all-in-one machines are highly reliable and that they generally extend the replacement lifecycle. "The mean time between failure on these things is so great," he says. "It makes the argument against all-in-ones that 'if one piece goes bad, you've got to throw the whole computer out' kind of meaningless."

Exprima's Pressman says his software team drives their machines very hard with web-based development applications, proving that all-in-one systems — despite their compact size and relatively low price tags — have high performance capabilities. "We do all kinds of HTML [and] CSS work on them," he says. "Also Adobe Suite design work and then a lot of cloud computing, without missing a beat."

Weighing the Benefits

Popular misconceptions aside, opting for an all-in-one system doesn't limit a buyer's hardware or software choices. Manufacturers offer models in a wide range of configurations, including different processor, memory, display size, operating system and external port options. "You've got a real wide array to choose from," ITIC's DiDio says.

Marshall notes that having identical all-in-one computers for all of his employees let him create a standard companywide computer platform. "If you have several PCs that are identical, you can build a standard image for what you want all your PCs to look like," he says. Then, if a computer suddenly fails because of a hardware or software problem, it's easy to replace the system with an identically configured replacement machine. "You blow it away and start again," Marshall says.

AMI Partners' Bose observes that an often overlooked benefit of all-in-one computers is that the units are much more portable than traditional desktop PC systems. "This is useful for firms who are on the road attending trade shows and need to be able to set up and take down kiosks quickly," he says.

For Pressman, the real value of all-in-one computers lies in their ability to cut costs, primarily by enhancing system uptime, power efficiency and staff productivity. **He estimates that switching to all-in-one iMacs is saving his company at least several thousand dollars a year.** "Invest in the best you can possibly afford, because it will pay off in efficiency, and pay off monetarily," he says.

▶ The Scoop on All-in-Ones

For the most part, all-in-one desktops have large LED backlit display screens (anywhere from 18 to 24 inches) with 1080p screen resolution, many of them being touchscreens. Backlit panels typically consume less power than standard panels and don't use mercury.

Most all-in-one PCs have Intel or AMD processors (single, dual and even quad core), and most come standard with up to 16 gigabytes of DDR3 memory. Hard-drive sizes range from 320 gigabytes to more than 1 terabyte. All have video cards, along with integrated webcams, DVD drives (mostly Blu-ray) and internal speakers. Many also have multicard readers and TV tuners.

They also feature multiple USB sockets, along with WLAN and Bluetooth connectivity. Wi-Fi is at least 802.11g, but some have 802.11n. And most units come with wireless keyboards (some with built-in trackpads) and mice. Although the all-in-ones have many standard features, there are some differences among the products.

Some HP TouchSmart desktop models, for example, have 60-degree reclining screens, and the Lenovo C100 is just 2 inches thick. Over time, industry analysts expect the all-in-one market to grow, partly because they are packed with features, but also because standardization is expected to drive prices down.

Intel recently announced that it will standardize components for all-in-one PCs, partially to make them more affordable. The effort is aimed at standardizing the motherboard of all-in-one systems, as well as its form factor.

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