Move aside, PCs, here come the tablets

April 28 2010, By Troy Wolverton

My mom is anything but a technophile. Even though she and my dad have had a computer for more than 25 years, she's still intimidated by them, worrying she might break or delete something by pushing the wrong button or clicking on the wrong place.

So I was surprised by how quickly she took to Apple's new iPad. Although she hardly ever uses her laptop at home, she repeatedly played with the iPad while visiting me recently, using it to surf the Web and watch videos about baking no-knead bread. She said she liked that it was lightweight and easy to use.

That got me thinking again about the future of computing. I wrote recently that the PC era was coming to an end, that the venerable gadget was in the process of being replaced by a collection of devices, including smartphones, app-playing set-top boxes, TVs and a collection of networked appliances and electronic devices.

I thought before that tablets would simply be a part of that mix of gadgets. Now I'm convinced that they're going to spearhead the revolution, that in short order PCs will be displaced by tablets like the iPad.

It's not just because tablets are so much more "accessible," as my mother puts it. It's also because PCs are a headache to use and maintain, even for tech-savvy consumers.

My sister-in-law Anina, for example, is no stranger to technology. She

has a Ph.D. in microbiology, is a patent agent and uses a laptop regularly in her work.

But recently she had a problem with her PC that prevented her from accessing a particular Web site. She had no idea how to solve the problem and found it so frustrating that she considered buying a new computer.

The problem turned out to have a simple solution. Her Web browsers were years old and in dire need of updates. Once I installed the latest versions, she was able to get into the site without a problem.

It was obvious to me that my sister-in-law's browsers needed updating, but I cover this stuff for a living. There's no reason Anina should have known that -- it's not like her computer was flashing a red light saying that her browsers were out of date. I often encounter friends, readers and others who are frustrated and daunted by the task of using and maintaining their PCs, including protecting them from ever-changing security threats.

Tablets like the iPad and the JooJoo, a browser-based tablet that also recently hit the market, have much more streamlined -- and inherently secure -- operating systems than PCs. On the iPad, for example, you generally can't install a program unless it's been approved by Apple, which, among other things, checks to make sure the program doesn't contain viruses.

Also, such devices typically prompt users when they need to update their applications or underlying operating system.

As recently as eight months ago, as rumors of the iPad started gaining steam, I couldn't imagine why anyone would want such a device. Even when Apple unveiled the new gadget in January -- and after numerous

other companies showed off prototypes of their upcoming tablets -- I had a lot of reservations about their appeal.

Color me convinced.

That my mom -- my mom! -- was quick to adopt the iPad convinced me that devices that simplify the process of going online and doing common tasks will find an audience among people who have never embraced PCs. And my sister-in-law's problems with her PC convinced me that tablets could also find a ready audience among many PC users.

But it's not just my mom and my sister-in-law who helped me appreciate the potential of tablets. I've been hearing about people as old as 90 adopting and loving iPads. My dad, who like me was initially doubtful he'd ever want or need a tablet, wanted to buy an iPad almost immediately after playing with my review unit for a few minutes.

That tablets will rapidly replace PCs seems obvious to me now. The history of electronics shows that when you take a complex product and make it less intimidating and easier to use, you open up the market for the technology.

AOL, which was far easier to use than previous online services, helped bring the masses online. Microsoft's Windows, which replaced the computer-derived command-line interface with a more user-friendly, graphically oriented one, broadened the market for PCs. And Nintendo's Wii, which simplified the controls used to play video games, has been the standout winner in the latest generation of consoles, attracting to gaming people who hadn't played in years, if ever.

Tablets have the potential to bring the same accessibility to contemporary computing. I say the sooner the better.

More information: (c) 2010, San Jose Mercury News (San Jose, Calif.).
Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.