

A guide to mobile devices and mobile device management for small business



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From providing connectivity for remote employees to enabling collaboration across distributed teams, to supporting customers in the field and beyond, mobile devices help small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) operate efficiently and flexibly.

But given the thousands of mobile devices on the market, choosing the best devices as part of an overall mobile device management for small business strategy can be a challenge.

Some devices excel more than others in areas like helping to protect security and data privacy or maximizing reliability for on-the-go employees.

To provide guidance on navigating the burgeoning world of SMB mobile devices, this guide describes key features and capabilities that SMBs should look for when purchasing smartphones, tablets and [connected laptops](#). It also discusses mobile device management software and the importance of ensuring proper mobile device management for small businesses.

Which mobile devices to buy for your small business is ultimately your decision, but here's some perspective on what to consider as you assess the many options on the market.

How mobile devices benefit SMBs

Even for businesses that use non-mobile IT equipment, like desktop computers, to help meet productivity needs, mobile devices can be vital for supporting operations and tasks that non-mobile solutions just can't handle.

For example, mobile devices make it easier for SMBs to engage with customers no matter where they're located—this means that a small business' ability to take on new opportunities isn't constrained by its IT infrastructure. Likewise, mobile device networks can help SMB employees remain in touch from virtually anywhere. Whether working from home, on a business trip or supporting clients in the field, mobile devices can enable employees to connect securely to the business' data and applications.

Providing employees with mobile devices also helps prevent the intermixing of business data with personal data, which can pose security and compliance risks. When businesses don't provision workers with devices and track them through centralized mobile device management solutions, it may become harder to keep private data private.

11 key features and capabilities in SMB mobile devices

Some mobile devices can be more effective than others at delivering key features and capabilities that typically matter to small businesses. When evaluating devices, consider how options compare among the following key areas.

1. Built-in connectivity

Most mobile devices can connect to the network in at least one of two ways—either over a local Wi-Fi connection or using a [4G LTE](#) or [5G cellular network](#), which can offer longer ranges than local Wi-Fi networks. For small businesses that need connectivity on the go, the ability to use cellular networks to get online is critical.

Virtually all smartphones feature built-in support for connecting to 4G LTE or 5G networks. But this is not necessarily the case with tablets, and it's rarely the case with laptops unless you choose a connected laptop—one featuring an integrated 4G LTE or 5G connection—meaning the device can get online from virtually anywhere, without being dependent on local, short-range wireless networks.

So, as you compare devices, one of your first steps should be determining whether the device offers the connectivity your business requires.

2. Ruggedness

Ruggedness refers to a mobile device's ability to stand up to the rigors of tough physical conditions. It's a critical consideration when selecting mobile devices for small businesses that need the devices to operate in demanding environments—such as outdoors, where they may be subject to rain or extreme heat, or in manufacturing plants, where dust and debris could harm phones, tablets and laptops that are not designed to stand up to challenging conditions.

To assess the ruggedness of a mobile device, consider factors like whether it's water-resistant, which temperature range it's rated to operate within and how it holds up to drop tests. The material used to construct the device is important, too; hard shells help shield the fragile internal components of devices from impacts.

3. Speed

The faster your business' mobile devices are, the quicker you can conduct business on the go.

For that reason, consider devices that offer powerful CPUs. CPU performance can be tough to compare in an apples-to-apples fashion because there are many CPU families and architectures and few metrics that universally represent CPU performance levels. In general, however, metrics like gigahertz, clock speed and core count are indications of a CPU's power. The higher each of these numbers, the better.

Volatile memory also impacts speed. Here, we're referring to the non-persistent memory (sometimes called RAM) that stores temporary application data, not persistent storage (which we'll discuss below). On most mobile devices today, you'll want at least 4 gigabytes of memory to achieve decent levels of performance, but more is better. High-end smartphones and tablets may feature up to 24 gigabytes of memory, and laptops could offer even more.

4. Storage capacity

Storage capacity, which is usually measured in gigabytes, determines how much data a device can store persistently—meaning data that is retained even if the device turns off. This is different from volatile memory, which stores application data temporarily, as we mentioned above.

The amount of storage an SMB will require on its mobile devices depends on how much data employees need to store locally. In general, storage capacity of about 64 gigabytes is a healthy minimum, but you may want more if workers will be downloading large files or taking many videos and pictures. On the other hand, if you'll mostly be uploading files over the network and storing them on servers, having expansive storage on mobile devices might be less important.

5. Screen size

Mobile device screen size can vary widely, and more is not always better. The larger the screen, the larger the overall device tends to be—and hence, the more challenging it may prove to move around. Larger screens may also reduce battery life because displays are one of the more power-hungry components on most devices. That said, larger screens make it possible to display more information at once, which can be useful when multitasking or presenting information to customers.

Whatever your priorities are in this regard, be sure to consider screen size and its impact on business operations.

6. Battery life

Battery life for mobile devices can range from a few hours for a power-hungry laptop to many days for hyper efficient tablets and smartphones. If your employees will be untethered for brief periods, shorter battery life may be acceptable because they can plug in their devices frequently to recharge. But for employees who need to be mobile and away from power infrastructure for extended periods, look for batteries that last longer.

Most mobile device manufacturers offer general battery life expectancy guidelines for their hardware. That said, keep in mind that usage affects battery life, so don't assume you'll necessarily experience the maximum advertised battery duration if devices are under heavy use.

7. Maintainability

Some mobile devices are easier to maintain than others. For instance, it may be difficult to replace batteries or broken screens on some devices because the parts aren't available, or if the devices are designed in a way that makes it very challenging for parties other than the device manufacturer to replace components.

This matters because devices that are difficult to maintain are more likely to break in irreparable ways, leading to shorter overall lifespans and, potentially, a lower ROI on the devices. To maximize maintainability, look for devices that can be easily serviced or come with long warranty periods guaranteeing the device vendor will perform repairs if components break down sooner than expected. Another option is to purchase a device protection plan subscription of which there are several types.

8. Device lifetime

Overall device lifetime is another important factor to consider. Device lifetime is affected, in part, by maintainability since devices that are easier to maintain can typically remain in service longer. But lifetime also reflects factors like construction, the ability of a device to resist wear and tear, and handling.

9. Containerization support

Containerization is a feature of mobile device management software that makes it possible to separate user-owned data from business data. This is important because even if an SMB establishes a mobile device policy stating that company devices are not for personal use, employees may still install their own apps on the devices. With containerization, personal apps remain isolated from company-owned software resources.

Containerization is typically enabled not through devices themselves, but instead through mobile device management software that tracks a business' mobile devices and isolates resources hosted on them. You'll want to make sure your device's operating system is compatible with the mobile device management software before you choose.

10. Operating system

More generally, the operating system running on your mobile device plays an important role in determining which third-party solutions will work with it. The two most popular operating systems, Android and iOS, are compatible with virtually all applications and mobile device management software that an SMB may want to use today. But if you are considering a device that uses a less common mobile operating system, you may want to review its integration features and compatibility.

11. Biometric authentication

[Biometric authentication](#) is a mobile device feature that allows users to sign in based on biometric characteristics—such as scanning a fingerprint or face. Because biometric data is tied to individual users, biometric authentication helps prevent unauthorized device access by malicious parties.

Keep in mind that the reliability of biometric authentication techniques can vary. For example, fingerprint scanning, a capability that has long been built into many smartphones, is easy to use, but it may not work well in situations where dust clogs fingerprint readers.

Authentication methods like facial scanning are more reliable in this respect, although they require more setup.

The role of mobile device management for small business

No matter which smartphones, tablets and connected laptops you choose to help power your small business, deploying mobile device management solutions can help you get the most out of your investment.

Mobile device management solutions centrally track and monitor all of the devices your company owns, no matter where or how employees are using them. In addition, mobile device management software can help secure the data and applications that reside on the devices and enforce the mobile device policy that governs their use.

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