iPad: The ideal boothmate?

More and more conference interpreters are toting iPads these days. But do we know how to make the most of tablet technology in the booth?

Interpreters are becoming an increasingly tech-savvy bunch. Most of my colleagues - especially the younger generation - now have smartphones in their pockets and tablets in their backpacks. It’s important that we look at how we can best integrate the technology we use in everyday life into our professional practice.

One question that comes up time and again is how the now-ubiquitous iPad can best serve our needs in the booth. I see more and more colleagues bringing their iPads with them to work, but opinions seem to be mixed about just how useful they are as boothmates. Some would appear to see iPads as little more than a way to stay connected, and use them only to check emails and work schedules. But I feel they must offer more than that. What I want to know is: how can iPads help us do our job?

In an attempt to obtain a satisfactory answer to that question, I contacted Alexander Drechsel, staff interpreter at the European Commission. Alexander has embraced new technologies in a way not seen in many senior interpreters. He has earned the reputation of being a bit of an iPad expert, and regularly shares tablet tips and tricks with his colleagues on internal training courses at the SCIC. Alexander also recently gave a demonstration on iPads to a crowd of tech-curious language professionals at the BDÜ conference "Interpreting the Future" in Berlin. Our chat was inspired by that presentation.

---

MH: Alexander, would you say that the iPad is the ideal boothmate?

AD: Definitely! I have been using an iPad almost exclusively as my digital booth companion for over two years and think it is perfect for referencing documents, looking up and managing terminology, and checking e-mail, to name just a few use cases. Also, the fully-charged battery will last you the entire day and, unlike with traditional notebooks, there is no bulky power brick and no noise from a fan or a keyboard.

MH: What made you switch to an iPad (from a laptop, presumably)?

AD: Yes, I did switch from a laptop. The main reasons for that are the ones I pointed out above: portability and a small footprint (very important in mobile booths with little space and few outlets). I also feel it keeps me more focussed on the task at hand than a larger and full-featured notebook would. This is probably because a tablet is smaller and usually only displays one app at a time.

MH: What are the main disadvantages of an iPad as compared to a laptop or netbook?
AD: Depending on how you look at it, the limited multitasking capabilities could be considered a disadvantage. For example, it is quite difficult to display content side by side on a tablet - say, two documents or two apps. You will have to switch back and forth between them.

Apple’s iPad also comes without several key technologies: Flash (for some interactive web content and videos), Java (for traditional web applications) and full USB connectivity. While you can connect your smartphone or digital camera to transfer pictures and video, you cannot just plug in the thumb drive the speaker gave you with his presentation on it. Android devices, on the other hand, are much more open in this regard.

MH: I imagine that you can always get around the lack of a USB port by having the speaker’s notes or presentation emailed to you. But is it true that it’s hard to work with MS Office files on a tablet, or is that just a case of unfounded iPad-bashing?

AD: Handling Office documents is actually quite straightforward on tablets: You can usually display them straight away (iPad) or with pre-installed apps (Android). For editing, you will either need to install dedicated apps or rely on web apps such as Google Drive or Office 365.

MH: Does it have to be an iPad, or are the tablets running Google Android and other iPad competitors just as good?

AD: In my view, pretty much all the tablets running either Apple’s iOS or recent versions of Google’s Android (meaning 4.0 or later) are great devices. If you’re interested in Microsoft’s newest spin on tablets, the Surface, I would recommend you wait for the Surface Pro, which will also run “classic” Windows software.

MH: Tell me about the apps on your iPad that you couldn’t live without.

AD: If I could install only one app on my iPad, it would have to be GoodReader. From file management to viewing and annotating PDFs - this app is the best thing since sliced bread. Then, of course, there are the essentials like Mail and the web browser (I prefer iCab Mobile). For terminology, I use Interplex HD (also available for iPhone and PCs). To keep up with news, I rely on Flipboard and Mr. Reader. My guilty pleasures would probably be Tweetbot (Twitter is great for interpreters!) and the occasional round of Angry Birds.

MH: Now the big question for interpreters: what about terminology management?

AD: Well, I already gave this one away now, didn’t I? Interplex is my go-to app for terminology management. It is very easy to use, allows quick searches and lets you synchronize your valuable words with other devices through Dropbox. What more could one ask for? If you’re looking for a more general database app for your terminology, have a look at Bento for iPad.

MH: And note-taking? Do you know of any apps that might work for consecutive assignments?

AD: I have been meaning to bring my iPad along on a consec job, but they are very rare in my case. And I think that smaller formats (iPad mini, Nexus 7, Galaxy Note) would be a better choice for such a situation. As for apps, you could try Penultimate (good drawing engine, wide choice of paper templates) or Paper (best drawing engine, very simple and intuitive notebook metaphor).

MH: If you had to recommend just ONE piece of booth-friendly hardware for a (possibly cash-strapped) young interpreter to invest in, which would it be?

AD: If you already have a mobile device (say, a laptop) and chances are that, as a student, you do, stick with that when you start out. Even just a smartphone can be very, very useful. During your first jobs, you’ll have to cope with so many things, don’t let a new device confuse you.
Once you really want to spend some money, ask yourself a few questions: Do you want a dedicated “booth device” (i.e. tablet) or something more versatile (i.e. a small ultrabook or notebook, like the MacBook Air)? Do you already have a smartphone? Then maybe you’ll want to stick with it, because many apps today run on both the phone and the tablet version of the operating system. Do you want a small tablet (better for mobile interpreting jobs) or a bigger one (better for the booth)? Talk to colleagues about their experience or check online resources such as interpreting.info.

MH: To wrap up, just one last question about technology take-up in the interpreting world. More than a decade into the 21st century, we interpreters are still faced with stacks of paper documents each time we walk into a meeting. Is this going to change any time soon? Does the advent of iPads and other mobile technology mean that the paperless booth is just around the corner?

AD: Where I work: no! And I presume the same applies more or less to the private market, too. I am sure however, that the situation will look very differently in two or three years. I certainly hope so!

Alexander Drechsel can be found on Twitter at @adrechsel and @tabterp.

Hear more of Alexander’s tips for working with iPads in the audio recording of his presentation (in German) at the BDÜ conference.

Read what other interpreters have to say on interpreting.info about iPads apps for the booth.

Recommended citation format: