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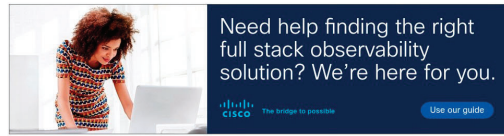
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FEATURE

Microsoft previews pen-based Windows XP variant at TechXNY

By Yardena Arar, PC World

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Microsoft Corp.'s long-awaited operating system for tablet PCs is making its debut at the PC Expo/TechXNY show in New York this week. It's a new Windows XP variant designed to help a PC stand in for pen and paper, and it's scheduled to ship this fall with a fleet of the first tablet PCs.

Windows XP Tablet PC Edition is basically Windows XP Professional with extensions for PCs that have a touch screen and stylus. The operating system will appear only on PCs with the necessary hardware; Microsoft won't sell it separately.

Hewlett-Packard Co., Toshiba Corp., Fujitsu Ltd. and ViewSonic Corp. have already announced their intention to release tablet PC systems, as have newcomers Paceblade Technology and Motion Computing Inc. Several vendors are showing prototypes at TechXNY.

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The term *tablet* isn't being taken too literally. Designs previewed by Microsoft at a recent reviewers' workshop ranged from Etch A Sketch look-alikes to slates that slip into a desktop-style docking station. All tablet PCs either include a keyboard or offer one as an option.

The preproduction Acer Inc. TravelMate 100, for instance, is a subnotebook that can be converted into a slate by swiveling its 10.4-in. active-matrix LCD touch screen 180 degrees and folding it back over the keyboard. The display operates either in landscape or portrait mode, and the operating system can be calibrated for right- or left-handed use (so that, for example, pop-up menus aren't concealed by the hand holding the pen).

The linchpins of Tablet PC Edition are the Tablet PC Input Panel, which allows users to enter text with a stylus using handwriting or a touch-screen keyboard, and the Journal utility, which lets users create and manage handwritten notes on a paper-like background.

The Input Panel is a rectangle that pops up when a user clicks on a small icon next to the Start button. It sits at the bottom of the screen and provides tabs to select keyboard mode or writing-pad mode, which converts handwriting to editable text on the fly. Users point and tap on the screen with a supplied stylus, much as they would on a Palm or Pocket PC. To input text -- say, a Web site address in Internet Explorer or a memo in Word (using a free Office XP Pack for Tablet PC download) -- users can use the Input Panel.

If the input rectangle feels a bit cramped, there's the Write Anywhere option, which lets users write within a rectangle covering most of the screen. *PC World* found the handwriting-recognition accuracy to be spotty in early tests, but if writing and keeping handwritten notes is more important, Journal might be Windows XP Tablet PC Edition's most compelling feature.

When the application is launched, users will see what looks like a blank sheet of lined notepaper. A user can start writing immediately with the default black-ink pen or choose another pen with a different point size or color ink, or a transparent marker.

A selection tool lets users highlight what they have written to easily cut, paste or change its appearance, or even convert it to text (though with no greater accuracy than Input Panel). Unlike the Input Panel, however, Journal won't convert handwriting to text on the fly.

How well does it all work? An early look at Journal's digital ink finds it impressive in its capability to mimic the look and feel of handwriting. The application could help people who take notes in meetings and then can't find them weeks later, or anybody who wants to mix drawings with their handwriting.

Alexandra Loeb, Microsoft's vice president for Tablet PC, says handwriting recognition is not intended to be the primary function of the operating system but is simply "the icing on the cake."

Pricing is another important clue to the devices' chance of success. If the extra cost for a convertible subnotebook such as Acer's isn't high, the tablet features might be worthwhile, even if they're used only for keeping valuable meeting notes. Most vendors of tablet PCs plan to announce pricing upon release.

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