

Sony Digital Paper

A Useful Tool

By Paul Purdue

As a child, I thought my Swiss Army knife was the most useful tool in the world. Packaged into one device were knives, a screwdriver, a can opener, a pair of scissors, a fork, a nail file, a toothpick, and my personal favorite, a corkscrew.

As a nine-year-old scout, I used to sit and think of all of the awesome things I could do with this incredible tool. I would dream up situations where this knife could get me out of a tight jam and maybe even save my life. Perhaps one day I would be marooned on an island, and with this device, I could still enjoy the comforts of civilization with my fork, knife, and toothpick. If I was lost in the desert, I could rig some contraption that might help me collect water and save myself from dying from dehydration.

The reality was that while I could do many things with this marvel of all marvels, I never did. The Swiss Army knife was a collection of bad options that technically would work, but provided no enjoyable experience. Why use a two-inch pair of scissors when you can cut with real scissors? Why use a tiny, weird fork when you can grab a full-size fork from the silverware

drawer? The only way you would use this knife for these auxiliary functions would be in situations in which you literally had no other good options.

For lawyers, tablets are the modern-day Swiss Army knife. They are great for taking pictures, keeping up with e-mail, browsing the Internet, and reviewing and making minor edits to documents, and have many other useful functions for lawyers. However, while tablets do many things incredibly well, they still fall short performing a few core functions—most notably, taking notes.

No matter how technologically advanced our workplace becomes, you still see lawyers sporting the same sleek, classic tool: the legal pad. When it comes to taking notes in a meeting, there's something special about writing with a fine-point pen on a pad of paper. I see it every day, and I suspect you do, too. But paper does not connect with the electronic systems you use regularly. To be truly useful, your handwritten notes need to be entered into a computer.

Enter Digital Paper from Sony. It's a tablet, but like none you've ever seen before. It doesn't take pictures. It doesn't play games. It doesn't do e-mail. It doesn't tell you where to get a triple latte skim. It doesn't remind you to pick up milk and bread on the way home from work. It doesn't even

surf the web. It does, however, give you the functionality and feel of physical paper combined with the connectivity and archival abilities of a connected tablet.

Yes, it is literally the electronic equivalent of a legal pad. It does one thing, and it does it with a level of elegance we don't often see in non-Apple products. It is the exact opposite of my childhood Swiss Army knife. It does not try to be a jack of all trades; it is the master of one thing—being a beautifully functional digital paper device.

So what exactly does it do?

One of the outstanding features of this device is its fine-point stylus, which allows you to take notes and annotate PDFs far better than any other device I have seen. Many other devices allow you to write with a stylus, but produce thick writing as if you're using a permanent marker.

In addition to handwritten annotations directly on your PDFs and notes, you can add either handwritten or typed sticky notes. You can also open multiple notes and documents in your workspace and quickly switch between them, allowing you to arrange and work with items in much the same fashion as you would at your desk.

Files are transferred between the device and a Box account over Wi-Fi or directly to a computer with the included USB cable.

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With a bit of tinkering, you can automate the transfer of documents between the device and your document management system, regardless of whether you use a dedicated system like Worldox or the DMS component of a practice management system like PracticeMaster or Time Matters.

Digital Paper is larger and thinner than a typical tablet—even slightly larger than a legal pad—at 9.25 inches wide and 12.25 inches tall. The screen is slightly smaller than 8.5 inches by 11 inches, so it feels like you're writing on a regular pad of paper. At just over a quarter of an inch thick, it's about as thick as a full legal pad and, at 12.1 ounces, a bit heavier.

The screen is plastic, which makes the device both light and very strong. At the ABA TechShow in Chicago this past March, I watched two Sony reps toss it around the Worldox booth. They even threw it at the ground fairly hard, and it survived without a scratch. The display is an E Ink grayscale that is very readable from any angle as long as there is light available, as the device has no backlighting.

The lack of backlighting helps the battery last forever; at least it seems that way to me. I typically have it on in full power or standby mode five days a week for 10 or more hours a day, but only need to charge it once a week. The one thing that will drain the battery is forgetting to turn it off at night and instead leaving it in standby mode.

I predict you will enjoy writing on Digital Paper. It feels like writing—real writing. If you've ever written on a traditional tablet, you're probably skeptical. One of the main differences is the fine-point stylus, which is the only thing that will produce a mark on Digital Paper. This means you can

rest your hand on the tablet as you write in the same way you do on actual paper.

Writing on a traditional tablet is quite different because traditional tablets are touch-sensitive, meaning anything that comes in contact with the screen makes a mark. This is why I love showing my Digital Paper to people who have written on a traditional tablet; they invariably hold their hand in the air as they write to avoid touching the device. Needless to say, this is not a very comfortable way to write, and certainly not something you could sustain for any length of time. When I demonstrate how I can rest my hand on the screen while I write, that is usually the tipping point—the point where they realize they are in love with a piece of hardware.

The love they feel for Digital Paper is sometimes enough to help them get over the price—but sometimes not. Today's price for Digital Paper is \$999, recently reduced from

\$1,100 when it was released in April 2014. In spite of the high price, it seems to be picking up steam within the legal community.

Sony is currently selling the device to legal professionals through its official resellers, Worldox and William S. Hein & Co. Sony is also quietly selling it through its website, but is not offering customer support for units bought directly, according to CNET.

Will Digital Paper make it in the long run? I believe it has potential to become widely adopted in the market. Sony has created a piece of hardware that gives the user the experience of writing on paper while maintaining the ability to have that information transferred and consumed by various electronic systems. For this, there is great demand. However, balancing this demand with an appropriate price is the challenge Sony faces. The demand will not go away, and for that reason, I believe Sony Digital Paper has a place in our hands, on our desks, and in our briefcases for many years to come. ■



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