The recent launch of Apple’s iPad has created an onslaught of buzz about tablet computers. While much of the iPad buzz is consumer-focused, its impact hasn’t been lost on the enterprise market. The attention this buzz has put on the tablet PC product class, as well as the technological innovations necessary to make a product like the iPad possible, has caused a revived interest in tablet PCs in the enterprise space. I recently talked with some experts in the tablet PC industry about the business case for a tablet computer for today’s enterprise user and the impact technological innovations in the consumer space have had on enterprise-class tablet PCs.

Is A Tablet PC Right For You?
To determine if a tablet PC is the right fit for your business application, there are two important considerations. First, is the tablet form factor the right form factor for your application? In other words, does a tablet form factor address your needs better than a handheld computer or traditional laptop would? Second, what level of ruggedness is appropriate for the environment in which the device will be used? “Tablet PCs are ideal for users who want the performance of a laptop in a highly mobile device that is easy to use while standing,” explains Mike Stinson, VP of marketing at Motion Computing. “A handheld is a good choice for a simple application that doesn’t display a lot of information on the screen, like scheduling. A traditional laptop is good for an application that requires a lot of typing, like email or document editing. A tablet can run robust applications on a sizeable screen with the convenience of a stylus or finger-touch input.” Scenarios in which the mobile worker is standing while using the device, such as field service, utilities, construction, and transportation applications, can benefit from the form factor of a tablet PC.

“A tablet is generally lighter and easier to use while on the move than a laptop, but will have a much larger screen than a handheld,” notes Kyp Walls, director of product management at Panasonic Solutions Company. “The other strong advantage of a tablet over handheld devices is the use of a full Windows OS. This allows IT to place full Windows applications at the worker level, reducing development costs and increasing the functionality and capabilities available to your workforce.” If you’ve ruled out a handheld but are stuck between a tablet and a laptop, it’s important to note that there are convertible tablet PC options available. “With a convertible tablet PC, users get the best of both worlds — the benefits of the tablet with the full keyboard experience of a laptop and the ability to switch between the two form factors,” says Paul Moore, senior director of mobile product management at Fujitsu America.

Consider TCO When Choosing Your PC
Once you’ve determined a tablet PC is the best fit for your application, the next step is to consider how rugged the tablet needs to be. “While the iPad has increased the awareness of the benefits of tablet computing, most enterprise users will quickly realize that a device like the
Technology Update

“While the iPad has increased the awareness of the benefits of tablet computing, most enterprise users will quickly realize that a device like the iPad won’t meet their enterprise needs.”

Mike Stinson, Motion Computing

iPad won’t meet their enterprise needs,” notes Stinson. “They’ll start searching for a device that’s right for their workflows — one that will run their corporate applications and is rugged enough to survive in the field.” While the iPad might seem an appealing option based on its $499 price point, a device like the iPad would be challenged to survive in many enterprise applications — imagine a utilities worker in a winter storm trying to fix power lines that are down or a construction worker dropping the device while on-site. The experts all agree that your best bet when choosing a device is to consider its TCO (total cost of ownership) versus making a decision on initial purchase price alone. “True TCO analysis includes anticipated product life, planned replacement cycles, and the impact of product failures on productivity,” says Walls. “Research data from VDC Research found that purchase price accounts for less than 30% of total deployment cost.”

On the flip side of choosing a device that is rugged enough, however, is paying for one that is more rugged than what you need. “While there is certainly a level of performance, IT compatibility, and functionality that is required with an enterprise-level deployment, a rugged PC typically costs two times that of a standard PC, so you must be sure the business case is there for a rugged device,” warns Moore.

The Impact Of Consumer Device Advancements On Rugged Tablets

In addition to the iPad’s impact of increased awareness on the tablet PC market, the innovation and advancements in consumer-focused technology have begun to appear in enterprise-class devices. “Integrated features like cameras, bar code scanners, GPS, and RFID (radio frequency identification) can now be built in to tablet PCs to enable the worker to carry one device when in the past they may have needed multiple devices,” says Walls. Further, similar to the way that GPS now comes standard in most consumer phones, many vendors are offering some of these key peripherals already built in.

“Enterprise users are looking for easy ways to gather and input data at the point of service, and touch technology that has become popular in the consumer industry is now penetrating the enterprise space,” says Stinson. “A touch interface can help users to more easily navigate the devices and complete tasks more efficiently.” To accommodate the increased functionality and advanced applications today’s tablets provide, battery manufacturers have had to keep up. “Since many popular features have become standard, end users now have to look for long battery life and hot swappable batteries that allow limitless use,” says Moore.

Also mirroring the consumer industry is the enterprise user’s need for always-on wireless connectivity. “Reliable wireless connectivity has become a necessity. With Gobi-enabled tablet computers, mobile workers benefit from the high-speed data capabilities of leading network operators in virtually all parts of the world,” explains Walls. “Gobi enables IT managers to streamline their operations by leveraging a single hardware and software solution for all of their nationwide and global branch office locations.”

While the impact of consumer-facing advancements in the enterprise space is clear, the experts explain that there is more to come. They note that over the next year, enterprise users can expect to see significant advancements in the processing power of rugged mobile computers, in new features to help conserve energy and battery life, in more specialized tablet PC software applications designed for specific industry workflows, and in more competitive pricing.

The advancements that are being made in the mobile computing industry are very beneficial to enterprise users. However, with all of the options available today, it can be overwhelming to choose a device that best fits your business needs. There’s no easy formula to follow to choose the right computer, but remember to have a clear understanding of your goal for the device, to do your due diligence in choosing a computing solution to meet your needs, and to be sure to consider the TCO of the device based on the application it will be used for and environment in which it will be used.