

# Dual screens can help increase productivity



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I knew I was getting older when I could no longer read those small license keys on Microsoft Windows certificates to type in during software installations. When reading books at night became difficult I broke down and bought a \$5 set of reading glasses.

My sight degradation was probably due to a combination of age and a quarter century of staring at computer screens for a living all day long. Switching over from CRT (cathode ray tube) to LCD (liquid crystal display)-based computer monitors has helped a great deal and has lessened my eye strain. Since the graphics are crisper and brighter I can get away without using glasses on most LCD monitors as long as the resolution is set correctly.

Another benefit of LCD monitors is that since they are much thinner than CRTs they end up taking far less desktop space. With that smaller footprint from the monitor and the newly acquired free space many people are adding a second monitor to their computer to have dual screens, also called dual heads.

I saw the use of dual screens first at one of my last contracts in Houston at a company called Enron Broadband (EBB) back in 2000. The gas and electricity traders there were just given dual and even triple computer monitors on the desks to watch

multiple market sources at the same time.

Somehow I got talked into taking that part time gig there to map out their network. After I discovered they were falsely representing physical network pipes with VPNs (Virtual Private

Networks) on a five-to-one basis, I bailed out of the project since it was fraud in my opinion.

A year later EBB and their parent company Enron crashed and burned. Five years after that, many of Enron's leaders were either dead or in prison. That decision to not participate in development of Enron Broadband's network map in the fall of 2000 most likely kept me off the witness stand.

Since then dual screens have made their way to Brenham. I am primarily seeing them at oil field related clients since the run up of the petroleum industry over the past few years has been so fast and furious.

For one client having the ability of two computer monitors side by side has become a necessity with nearly every employee having them on their desks.

They use the two display devices to show at least two full windows simultaneously. In other words, they can watch their Microsoft Outlook continuously showing their e-mail arriving on the primary screen on the left while they are working on an Excel spreadsheet on the

secondary monitor to the right.

They swap the active application simply by moving the cursor from screen to screen. As long as the monitors are setup correctly they can move their mouse (which moves the cursor) from left to right which makes the cursor smoothly and seamlessly jump from the left primary monitor to the right secondary one.

Different program windows can be put on either of the dual screens by partially minimizing the windows (making it smaller) and dragging it to the other monitor.

After it resides on the desired screen the window can be maximized to fit in the new monitor by hitting the square icon on the upper right.

I would not recommend dual screens if you still have the large and bulky CRT monitors unless you have a really huge desk. The smaller physical size and vastly reduced footprint of LCD monitors now makes it possible to fit

one or more screens onto a standard desk.

With the newer bracket systems I have seen some financial wizards with arrays of four and even six 17-inch monitors displaying numerous windows surrounding its user.

You too can have dual screens to become mega-productive easier than you think. First you need to buy a second monitor that is preferably the same make, model, color and especially size as the original one.

Place the new identical LCD monitor just to the right at the same level and angle. Put them side to side as close as possible to give a merged screen look and feel to the pair of monitors.

Since most PCs come with a graphics adapter that supports only a single monitor you will have to head over to see Harper at Computer Helpers to purchase a dual monitor graphics card. These dual headed graphics cards start at around \$75 but can go higher depending on the

amount of memory on them.

Installing and configuring the dual headed cards can be quite tricky. Over the years I have been able to set up most of them myself but about one of four becomes too difficult due to firmware, BIOS and driver settings. I drop it off to Harper for him to configure since he does that stuff all day long.

Basically the original graphics card is either removed or most likely just deactivated and the new dual screen adapter takes over the screen management. You can enter the display configuration by going to Start-Control Panel-Display and then click on the Settings tab within the Display properties window.

Within the Settings window you will see the resolution and other parameters that can be configured for both LCD computer monitors. I recommend having the resolution (usually set to 1024x768) set the same on both monitors.

If the monitors are swapped

and the cursor does not move left to right properly then you can click, drag and move them to their right positions. Of course you can also just physically move the monitors.

If you have a laptop you can add an external monitor to provide the dual screen environment right away since they already have the second graphics interface installed.

Once you get the two screens set up just like you want them, you will be amazed how much more you can get done by having two or more application windows viewable at the same time.

Bottom line: We've all heard two heads are better than one and two computer screens can definitely help your productivity — plus it looks pretty cool!

Next week's column: iPhone app store.

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