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An **Endangered** Species: The Desktop Computer

After the invention of the microprocessor in 1977, personal computers were on the fast track to widespread use across the U.S. Although the first versions nearly took up as much space as a refrigerator, size was nothing compared to the mainframe computers that were housed in entire rooms. Yet three models released that same year actually could fit on a desktop. They were the Commodore PET, Apple II, and Tandy Radio Shack 80.

And still, the evolution of smaller and faster continued. First, there were computers small enough to finally fit on a Desktop, then soon fit on a *Laptop*. But what about mobility? People needed (and wanted) something smaller with the acceptable trade-off of less powerful . . . something that could be carried – like the size of a *Notebook*. But what if the user only wanted to access the internet? Try a *Netbook*. Still not small enough, *PDA's* were hip for a few years. For portability, people were okay with ditching a keyboard, hence the *Tablet*. Perhaps not small enough yet, the failed *Ultra-Mobile PC* (UMPC) came briefly into the picture. But it was *Smartphones* that soon grew

to be an economical favorite. Where does the technology take us from here? (My 40+ year-old eyes aren't going to cooperate with anything smaller!)

In the constant evolution of data devices, the gene pool grows. Consumers now have an infinite number of ways to access Web sites, view email, take photos, or play games. Desktop computers at home now seem
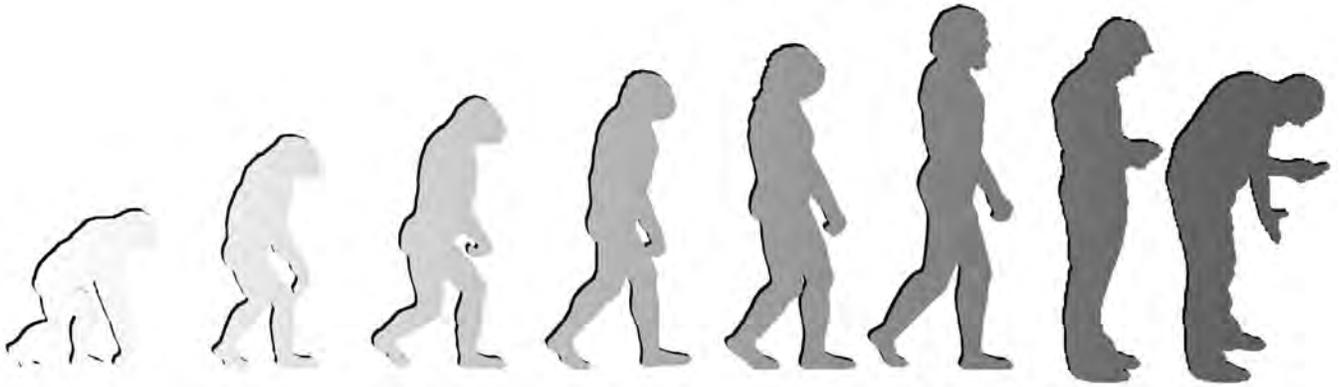
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cumbersome and unnecessary for the average household, as software and operating systems continue to be expensive. Mobile devices are the obvious economical alternative, as cell phone companies offer monthly plans for unlimited data. Even home phones are becoming obsolete and families are dropping those services, which often had included Internet access. But who needs to pay for duplicate service?

These genetic mutations only increase as the Desktop fades in popularity. *Phablets* are a hybrid of a phone and tablet for those favoring a larger screen. *Two-in-ones* are a hybrid of laptop and tablet which feature the more powerful computing of a laptop but portability of a tablet. And for those too "active" to hold a device in your hands, *Wearable Devices* like Google Glass can allow you to navigate, send messages, play music, search for information, or use other apps just by wearing glasses.

What does this mean for small cities and rural water districts? Increasingly more and more users are limiting desktop computer use to work, choosing a simpler mobile option for personal use at home. Those involved in maintaining and distributing data have responsibilities to their constituents and customers. Here are some basic considerations:

❖ The first, imperative step is to have an understanding how users view the site and access data. Install an analytics tool to document what devices users are using to view the Web site. There are many free resources available to accomplish

this, such as Google Analytics, Stat Counter, Piwik, or Clicky.

❖ View the Web site on a smartphone. (If you don't have one, go to the Apple store and play on their demo devices!) Pay attention to the navigation and if touch devices are allowed to access a Web site's menu. Also, look for image sizes and overall screen width. If the user has to zoom in to see anything, then that site is not mobile friendly. Pay attention for any unnecessary as well as any horizontal scrolling. A Web site will look different on a phone held landscape compared to upright, and both views should allow the user to read content and access the page without horizontal scrolling.

❖ Another important thing to consider is how your data is deployed; if you use pdfs for forms online, make sure they can be downloaded through a link instead of only displayed embedded. If possible just collect form data through an online form submission instead.

❖ When in doubt, choose content over image. Flash components are notorious for causing problems on tablets or smaller devices. If a Web site has any, make sure their content is important enough to warrant their existence, and not just be for aesthetics.

The theory of Survival of the Fittest – the Desktop is not yet doomed.
There is still a significant need for a powerful, fast computing. As I write

this, I have two towers (desktops but not on my desk) and three monitors in front of me. For clerical or programming work, there is no substitute for the Desktop, and supplementing its use with

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connections to mobile devices is just icing on the cake.

There is no doubt in the past 37 years, human inventors have contributed greatly to the advancement of Personal Computing Evolution. But the jury is still out on how mobile devices have contributed to the advancement of Human Evolution.

Since 1997, Jen Sharp (JenSharp.com) has served business and government across Kansas and the US and even internationally, specializing in Web development, design & programming including e-Learning, ecommerce, content management systems, and other small business solutions.