

Phil's Ramblings

Welcome to spring / summer! As the seasons change, so does the Tech frontier....

Big news at Microsoft! They have just announced the layoff of 1,850 staff from their smartphone hardware business, with up to 1,350 of those job reductions occurring in Finland at the former Nokia operations acquired a few years ago by Microsoft.

Given that Microsoft has touted their intent to create a single Windows OS and universal app library that will tie together computers, tablets and phones, this announcement begs a lot of questions. The uncertainty is further reinforced by Microsoft's 2015 announcement of Continuum, the ability to create, modify and store content in OneDrive from any device, from anywhere. Promotional articles and photos actually show Windows phones connected to a monitor and keyboard being used as miniature PCs to access and modify content stored in OneDrive.

In some ways this layoff announcement probably should not be a surprise. Windows phone market share, always miniscule compared to iOS and Android, has actually shrunk in the past year. Meanwhile, Microsoft has yet to release Windows 10 Mobile to existing Windows phone users, limiting it to a few high-end new phones that were introduced since last July. Reviews of the new software on those phones have been mixed; the perception has been that Microsoft is having problems fine-tuning Windows 10 Mobile and was therefore delaying roll-out to existing Windows 8.1 Phone users.

Microsoft's drive toward Universal apps was supposed to be the catalyst for greater market penetration by Windows phones going forward. With truly universal apps, a user would be able to use their favorites on any device. This was expected to create an incentive for developers to step up their focus on the Windows platform, and create lots of new Windows apps. And, lots of new Windows apps would in theory make Windows phones more competitive in the smartphone marketplace. Whether because of the lack of Windows phone market penetration, existing developer tie-ins with the Apple and Android universes or something else, there has not been a significant increase in Universal Windows 10 apps since that OS launched last July

What happens now is anyone's guess. Here is what a Microsoft spokesperson had to say after the layoff announcement, as reported in a related PC World online article:

"We will continue to develop new devices and adapt Windows 10 for small screens, support Lumia Phones such as the Lumia 650, Lumia 950 and Lumia 950XL, and phones from our OEM hardware partners like Acer, Alcatel, HP, Trinity and Vaio, where we're seeing good traction," a Microsoft representative said in a statement, when asked if the Microsoft Lumia smartphone brand was officially dead. "We have nothing to share about our future product roadmap."

Meanwhile, the same PC World article reports that Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella has stated that development will also continue on Continuum. So, one could assume that this layoff announcement may simply represent Microsoft getting out of the phone hardware business

and leaving that arena to their OEM hardware partners, while development of phone software and apps will remain a priority within Microsoft. Time will tell.....

Another big Tech announcement, this time from Alphabet (Google)! Over the balance of the year Google will modify their Chrome OS to allow Android apps from the Google Play store to run on Chromebooks. You can read more about this in a recent Yahoo! Finance article; here is the link: <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/buy-chromebook-android-apps-200443448.html>.

Chromebooks have made significant inroads in the educational marketplace and have also been well received by home users who have ready access to the Internet and who are looking for a simple, inexpensive device to handle mail, social media and Web-browsing. But, they have suffered to an extent from the fact that, unlike the Google Play Store, the Chrome OS Store has a very limited number of apps. Since these were the only apps that would run on a Chromebook, this meant that owners who had come to rely on a series of favorite apps on their Android phone would in most cases not be able to run those same (or similar) apps on their Chromebook. Moreover, since Chromebooks were designed with the idea that application software would be stored in the Cloud, they required Internet access to do just about anything – even creating something simple like a letter.

In recent years, Google has made it possible for users to store Google's proprietary "office" software on their Chromebook, so users can now create documents offline for future uploading to their Google Drive account in the Cloud. However, for those dependent upon Microsoft Office software for business – or simply for ease in sharing content with friends and family – "work-arounds" are necessary that involve first creating the content in the applicable Google software and then converting it to its Office counterpart or creating native Office documents online in a Microsoft OneDrive account. With the transition to allow Android apps to run on Chromebooks, this all becomes much simpler. Microsoft has made key Office software components available as free apps in the Google Play Store, so Chromebook users will eventually be able to create, print, store and transmit Office documents in much the same way that they would on a Windows PC.

Initially, Google will provide this Android app capability on a few new Chromebook releases during the third quarter of 2016. However, during the fourth quarter of 2016 they are expected to roll out this capability to many existing Chromebooks through an automatic Chrome OS upgrade. Early model Chromebooks are not likely to be upgraded; however, most Chromebooks released in the last two years will be eligible.

Stay tuned; I'm sure we will see quite a bit more on this subject during coming months!