Let’s face it: mobile devices have taken over our lives. From smartphones to iPads to all-in-one PCs, every manufacturer is looking to claim its piece of the pie. Selecting the right mobile devices to introduce into your dental practice is more daunting now than ever before. So, how do you choose?

One of the first things to understand is that although a tablet and a tablet PC may be similar in appearance, they are two very different devices. A tablet is a thin, lightweight, mobile device that can connect to the Internet and run small programs called apps (applications). Although they are handy for personal use, tablets are not robust enough to install or run an actual software program. Tablet PCs, on the other hand, are true mobile computers, with true operating systems and the same processors and hard drives as a desktop PC.

When considering the addition of mobile devices to your practice, consider how you want to use them and what you want them to do for your practice. In addition, you need to consider whether your practice management system can run effectively and efficiently on them. Will the PMS software run in its entirety on a tablet PC, or does your PMS solution require you to purchase additional external apps that only run on a tablet/iPad? Also, will these apps need to be synced to your PMS or do they run in real-time? The XLDent Dental Practice Management system, for example, is supported in its entirety on a tablet PC. This means there are no additional apps to go.
For the purpose of keeping it simple, let’s focus on tablet PCs. Again, a tablet PC is a fully functioning computer system. Effectively integrating a tablet PC into your patient registration workflow requires a tablet PC that can fully replace a pen and clipboard; therefore, the ability to capture patient signatures in a digital format is a must. If you are also considering software that accepts text input for digital forms, it’s wise to include an external keyboard on your “must-have” feature list as well. For digital signature capture, the tablet PC needs true digitizer capability for fluid and accurate capture of even the messiest handwriting. You can identify these tablet PCs easily, as they come equipped with a stylus that looks a lot like a regular ink pen (sharp tip). If the tablet PC requires you to purchase a separate stylus, or only works with a stylus bearing an uncanny likeness to a miniature bingo dauber, it does not have digitizer capability and should be avoided.

A great example of a tablet PC for front desk workflows is the Microsoft Surface™ Pro 2 or Pro 3. This tablet PC comes equipped with a digitizing stylus that’s perfect for signing documents as well as an optional case with detachable keyboard (sold separately). It also has a built-in kickstand that allows it to either lay flat or be displayed vertically at two different angles. The treatment room requires a highly specialized tablet PC that is powerful enough to handle digital image capture, durable enough to withstand the onslaught of dust, debris, and sterilization chemicals common in a dental treatment room, yet still pretty enough not to scare your patients. Consumer-grade devices simply do not measure up to the harsh demands of this environment. Tablet/iPads and their various associated apps will not be able to deliver all of the feature functionality that you require. What you need here is the Indiana Jones of tablet PCs.

Tablet PCs specifically created to meet the high demands of a healthcare environment are perfect for dental treatment rooms. They are durable, fully sealed, and easily disinfected. They typically include a versatile line of accessories, such as charging stations and docks as well as easy-swap batteries to keep up with you all day. Motion Computing’s C5te line even incorporates an easy-carry handle. The mobile computing market is a living, breathing thing, with more and more choices emerging every day. Smartphones are getting even smarter, and Ultrabooks—the love-children of a recent laptop/tablet PC tryst—are quickly gaining in popularity. The choices are mindboggling. The key to successfully navigating all the options is to first evaluate the capabilities of your practice management software in support of mobile devices. Then you have to find a balance between the type of device you want, and what you need it to do for your practice.