INTRODUCTION

Decision Criteria in I.T. Purchasing: Essential Products sets forth simple principles, statistics, and heuristics that can be used in evaluating the multitude of hardware and software options in today’s market. This volume is focused on desktop systems—volumes on mobile, multimedia, Apple, and other sectors of technology will follow. Each platform has its advantages, but the desktop is where the most intense work in an organization tends to be conducted. We make no claim of being complete, but cover, we believe, more products than any one person, unless fanatic or deranged, is likely to have on one desktop.

Our goal, first and foremost, is to discern category leaders and the criteria on which they deserve consideration. Our second goal is to present an alternative to the generally abject state of computer journalism, discussed at the end of this introduction. We acknowledge, nonetheless, that part of what we do is not unique. Like many publications, this work is published in print and online. Both versions are grounded in the Freemium model of publishing, whereby concise versions are free, and expanded versions are sold by subscription. We add to this model four concepts that, we believe, have never been brought together in the same way.

Four Concepts

### *Hierarchical ranking of products*

### The first concept is a hierarchical ranking of products as determined by an informal panel of industry experts and consensus of users, but also, at the final point, by our editorial judgment. This kind of editorial judgment is implied, if not always acknowledged, by a great many guides, introductions, analyses, indices, prizes, crowd-sourced lists, and so on in a variety of subjects. In disparate ways, for example, Zagat and Michelin guides, stock and mutual fund ratings, Academy Awards and Nobel Prizes, Yelp.com and RottenTomatoes.com, bestseller lists and the once-popular Whole Earth Catalog, for example, show how recognition of what is deemed important can emerge from a welter of competing choices. The recognition implies, but in no way denies, the existence of other choices.

Selectivity, as opposed to a bloated directory, is the object here. Unlike Castle Connelley’s compilations of best doctors and lawyers or Google Shopping, the following pages will not show companies that have paid for inclusion—we accept no advertising. We sell no products, earn no commission from anyone’s sale, and have no incentive of any type to promote a given product. Instead, we try to earn our keep by being opinionated, forthright, and, when warranted, iconoclastic.

For the same reasons we have no ambitions of offering a drab buyer’s guide, although the discernment of category leaders and elaboration of applicable criteria assumes purchasing and intelligent decision-making. At least the views expressed are our own and not a disguised attempt to sell products or curry favor with sponsors—we have none. Nor do we have any affinity with native advertising or content marketing, dual names for the sleight of hand whereby ads try to pass as editorial material­—an outrageous assault by the advertising community on the reader’s credulity.

*Decision criteria*

We not only rank the salient choices in popular product categories, but also list what we consider to be the principal factors that should guide you to further research. We are skeptical that the final opinion about whether you should acquire or ignore a product can be rendered by anyone except you. Instead of pretending that a product can be reviewed in the abstract, with no knowledge of your goals, budget, tolerances, and hardware or operating system constraints, we rather try to give you a series of filters—i.e., criteria—that you can then apply according to your needs and priorities. The specification of these criteria is the essence of this study.

A mathematical representation of these criteria—*e.g.*, score weighted by a subjective probability—might have its place, but we abstain from this approach. No remote analyst is in a position to guess the relative strength of your values. In recognition of the open-ended nature of this study, whereby the final answer is supplied by you rather than us, we tend to present the decision criteria in the form of a question.

Any vendor can devise criteria which makes a given product seem superior to its competitors, as we see so often in grids purporting to compare features of competing products. The grid may be helpful to a point, but invariably resorts to selectivity and contorted generalization intended to enforce bias. We abstain from this approach where there is no breakaway favorite. In fact, as in sports, judicial proceedings, or lotteries, sometimes there is no winner. In these instances, instead of anointing an arbitrary favorite, we only suggest criteria that you may wish to apply according to your interests and requirements. These criteria, stated as succinctly as we can, take the form of the italicized headings in our Products section. Indeed, succinctness is a major goal of this project.

Some of these criteria, like cost and intention, are repeated for different products. We are not trying to derive a unique filter for each product, but rather showing the context or assumptions under which repetitive factors apply.

*Stereoscopic vision*

Where leaders can be discerned, we present two contrasting points of view in a kind of stereoscopic vision. The first point of view is the consensus of our informal panel of experts. For the time being they are anonymous—as industry insiders, often with corporate constraints and conflicting allegiances, they are reticent about appearing to endorse products on behalf of their companies. Admittedly, as in split Supreme Court decisions, experts can disagree with each other, and the panel of experts only provides imput for the editors who take responsibility—and thus blame—for the final editorial choices. More often than not, a range of choices is given, rather than an arbitrary favorite.

The second point of view, which will require time to develop fully, is a crowd-sourced opinion—your chance to vote on our editorial choices or to add your own. Here, however, voting is limited to subscribers. There is a modest attempt at statistical correction for the sake of accuracy, and all comments are subject to editing, as for length and spam, but never point of view.

This dual point of view—from both experts and crowd—is important since neither approach is foolproof. Experts can be impeached, but crowds also can err, as in elections (does the best candidate always win?), casinos (with odds against you, every bet is a fool’s bet), financial bubbles, or artistic preference (popular art tends to attract more media attention than enduring art). We have only to look at marriage to realize that the “the masses” can go astray. The divorce rate in the U.S. is around 40-50% (and would soar further if couples who are considering divorce were counted).[[1]](#footnote-1) If, perhaps half of the time, we cannot make the most intimate decisions of our lives correctly, a reasonable skepticism should attach to *vox populai* as the standard of correctness. Popular opinion, however, matters to the extent that it reflects sales, for without commercial success products will be short-lived. Your vote, of course, matters, and we cordially invite it, as well as any comments that you care to share.

*Watchdog publishing*

Once category leaders and the criteria by which they should be judged are defined, the next object is to determine necessary additions or subtractions from it, for it is well-known that we live in constant change. Not only are competitors always at work, trying to out-maneuver and out-innovate successful products, but it is sometimes difficult for products developed for a particular niche or window of opportunity to keep growing with the market. Bearing witness to the short celebrity of once-leading products are Ashton Tate’s dBase, Zenith TVs, Apple’s Newton, WordStar, Zip Drives, Pure Digital Technologies’ Flip Video Camera, and Qualcomm’s Flo TV, along with products that may still be in use, but rapidly are passing into oblivion—*e.g.*, CRT’s, dial-up modems, Treos, answering machines, and stereo consoles. Even such powerful companies as IBM, Microsoft, and HP have had their setbacks, while out of nowhere have come products like the iPhone and iPad, social media, cloud services and software, and, with them, new consumer habits that upend prevailing business and computing models.

The determination of whether a leading product has been overthrown or whether a new product category has been created gives rise to the third concept of this study. The concept has no name of which we are aware, but we will call it “watchdog publishing.” We are not just ranking products, but also monitoring changes in these rankings. We speak up—“bark,” if you must say—only when there are changes in the perceived hierarchy of products. Neither chasing rumor and hype, echoing “the pack,” nor shooting down a vendor’s claim to fame is what we propose. Rather we ask for your attention only when there is obvious crowning or dethroning of a market leader. It is then and only then that we send out a dispatch because our belief is that you should not have to read about the struggle of inferior products to gain acceptance. That struggle is incessant, and so would be your reading about these products—good for a publisher who needs a constant stream of news against which to sell ads, but tiresome for the reader who has no idea whether most product reviews need to be read at all.

In this way, watchdog publishing spawns an “anti-magazine.” Traditionally, the magazine has offered a combination of diversion and education intended to keep you coming back week after week or month after month for traditionally advertising was sold on the basis of frequency and reach and still is. The publisher guarantees the advertiser a certain number of readers, billed as cost per thousand (CPM) that require a certain number of pages per year. Online advertising has a similar model, whereby Web pages count as page views or clicks. The anti-magazine, in comparison, does not expect you to return on a regular schedule, for we come to you—not as a magazine in the mailbox or inbox, but rather as a dispatch when there really is news. News in this sense is not the endless flow of stories that a newswire like Associated Press puts out, but rather an announcement that the hierarchy of products has changed and analysis of why. Material for casual reading is not the product, but rather a combination of the free guide and updates to it, where the updates come effortlessly, typically by email, and you no longer have to keep reading to determine whether an item actually is newsworthy. Accordingly, there is minimal attempt to entertain you, and the value comes in lookups by you or bursts by us, as opposed to long-form, cover-to-cover reading. The pursuit of news nonetheless remains a primary objective that accounts for the principal difference of the anti-magazine from a reference work like a dictionary, index, or handbook, which, in print at least, may go years without a new version.

Watchdog publishing has an affinity to alerts, but differs in significant respects. Announcements from a vendor who succeeds in signing up consumers for news releases tend to come with more frequency than the consumer desires, for most of the “news” is really a way of staying in touch with a prospective customer and raising the saliency of the company or its publicist. Instead of cluttering up a mailbox with minutiae in this sense, our intention is to withhold dispatches until there is actual news in the context of our published criteria. In place of automated or largely automated messages, which tend to become mere push, there is human intelligence which separates wheat from chaff. Instead of attempting to function as a newswire, watchdog publishing aims, if only metaphorically, to be a form of insurance—coverage of the risk that important technological change will occur without your knowledge.

On our view, you should not have to spend any time at all in reading about inferior products that are in no danger of dislodging a market leader. Our assumption is that the market leaders encompass most of the functionality of the next best products—otherwise, leaders would not be leaders. If ever they are overtaken by a competing product, the “watchdogs” will let you know. Yet, if you have a special interest that the general market fails to address, you probably know already what product serves that interest, and we make no claim of being able to address every need**.**

Contrary to marketers, who proclaim a revolution every day, only a few products disrupt the status quo as defined by the products that we list. However, when the world changes, you should know about it at once, and it is here that we sell subscriptions. Our survey of leading products is a free service and, for a limited time as we get started, so is a snapshot of the decision criteria which applied as of the last printing of our guide. However, updates to the decision criteria, notification of whether our pantheon has changed, and access to our user forum entail a yearly subscription.

Distinction from Prevailing IT Publishing

By definition, industry insiders, including developers, product managers, strategic planners, consultants, and sometimes investors, are in a different category from the non-specialist, and this study is not intended for them. The IT specialist is never satiated by too much industry news and gossip. In any field insistence on the centrality of the specialist is a way for the specialist to assert importance, gain influence, and thereby promote career goals. Yet, just as war is too important to leave to the generals, IT has escaped the glass house and become integrated with everyday life. We grant developers/IT insiders their due, and we admire the creative work that goes into the products that we cover. Indeed, no industry would thrive without its producers and promoters. However, the rest of us use computers and software, not as an end in themselves, not as a full-time occupation, but to accomplish another task, whether selling goods, practicing law or medicine, trading financial instruments, writing reports, conducting experiments, designing cars, completing coursework, and so on. These real-world preoccupations take precedence over learning—if one ever could—all the ins and outs of new computer products. While experts and other insiders want to be steeped in unending technical information, the rest of world is content with a general knowledge of a product category, what the leaders accomplish, and which products are worth acquiring. The headaches and finer points of each product will appear soon enough after the product is purchased, and few of these features even will be remembered prior to trying the product.

There are two exceptions to this thinking. One is for products that achieve such notoriety that they become a point of departure for conversation about new technology—a new iPad or iPhone would qualify. Another exception arises for research of a product when you have narrowed down your choices to final options and are ready to make a purchase. Otherwise, it tends to be useless to read a verbose account of a product which only needs to considered on a thumbs-up or thumbs-down basis—check it out or ignore it. That is not to say that there no value in learning whether a heavily advertised product works as intended. Just as “Artists are the antennae of the race,” in the words of Ezra Pound,[[2]](#footnote-2) computer journalists have a role to play in the popularizing a product and start of a reference database. We cite a number of perceptive articles for documentation and further reading.

A famous polemic published in 1926, *The Treason of the Intellectuals* by Julian Benda (*La trahison des clerc*s in French), accused writers of abandoning the Hellenistic search for truth and lending their talents to political pragmatism. In a similar vein there all too often, though hardly universally, is a scandal in computer journalism, as writers cozying up to vendors, relax their presumed standard of independence and objectivity.

This scandal generally takes the form of over-reliance on vendor announcements, often paraphrased as news or even published word for word without attribution. The latter is tantamount to plagiarism, but gleefully encouraged by the vendors and their publicists. At least this legalized plagiarism appears to be a minority strain in computer journalism and is frowned upon by diligent journalists. A traditional journalist interviews knowledgeable sources and seeks a balanced point of view; in a war a feckless journalist makes first-hand observations from the trenches or dies trying. But when the computer product has yet to be released, even under non-disclosure, the press for competitive reasons tends to rely on one-sided assertions from the vendor. No one wants to report old news or be seen as less informed than the rest of the “pack.” Accordingly, products known only second-hand can be trumpeted as the next “big thing” in computer hardware and software. However, products can be cancelled and companies can pivot before widely touted products come to market—witness the Plastic Logic tablet, the [QUE proReader](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plastic_Logic), which, despite ample press, was overwhelmed by the iPad and never shipped. The poor cousin to products that never make it out of the gate is vaporware, a product that exists, if at all, only in design phase which is never commercialized. Sometimes vaporware announcements are a conscious attempt to confuse competitors and to make them spend money trying to solve intractable problems. Naïve journalists can be taken in by the same con.

Part and parcel of the media’s toadyism to vendors is the recognition that access to personnel, press events, and products for review is dependent on favorable relations with the vendor; just as financial analysts who become skeptical of the “party line” have been known to be shunned by companies that they cover, a journalist seen as too hostile to the company may be shut out of the festivities when new products are unveiled.

Enterprise products invite similar dependency on the vendor for there is no way that a reporter living in a garret can replicate an enterprise system for testing. At best the reporter can check the interface, interview consultants, and cite the experience of select customers, who may or may not be representative. But in the exigencies of deadlines, the reporter has little opportunity to develop thorough research. The reporter then becomes susceptible to guidance by the vendor to friendly sources—often customers—who have their own interest in staying on good terms with a supplier. In fact, there may be no research at all, but only a reworded announcement from the vendor or uncritical interview with its chief marketing officer.

A computer review can suffer from further failings. For one, there is a tendency to view the product in isolation, when it is really part of a trend or group of products attempting to accomplish the same result. Sometimes these group associations are noted, but space limitations militate against exploration of interrelationships that easily could be seen as digressive, and passing references to these interrelationships may not be able to do them justice. We are not immune from this problem ourselves, and a related failing of reviews is a tendency to eschew a sense of finality. Since today’s products are in constant threat of becoming obsolete, judgment can only be tentative until the degree of obsolescence becomes known, and by then, the industry will have moved on. Moreover, the reviewer must pretend that every review is of equal interest to the reader because if the reader were ever told, “Here is a product which you can ignore,” the reviewer as expositor of that product would have nothing to “peddle” and, to that extent, be out of business. The idea is to keep the reader returning issue after issue, page­ after page, to keep readership, clicks, and advertising at maximum levels.

Our goal in new media is to break from this form of publishing, conserve your time, direct you to the broad consensus of category leaders, make explicit the criteria by which the leaders should be evaluated, and to place no more demands on your time than the news actually warrants.

1. See <http://www.apa.org/topics/divorce/>, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divorce_in_the_United_States>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See <http://books.google.com/books?id=uOQMlH_zYNAC&pg=PA297&lpg=PA297&dq=ezra+pound+artists+are+the+antennae+of+the+race&source=bl&ots=Q3FFCVnohD&sig=5MCGdkGSV_KkgKbAPNOU9pMpldI&hl=en&sa=X&ei=jZS_UueTB7bJsQS0xoLoDQ&ved=0CFMQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=ezra%20pound%20artists%20are%20the%20antennae%20of%20the%20race&f=false>.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)