

Tips, Tricks and Advice from your local “IT Guru”

This month I want to talk to you about wearables. This is a new category of gadgets that some people, mainly hardware manufacturers, think is going to be the next big thing after smartphones. Basically, a wearable is any electronic device that you can, well, wear! The biggest category is what's known as Smartwatches, but can also include the much-ridiculed Google Glass and the variety of fitness bands that have appeared on the market. These are simple devices that can measure, amongst other things, distances and pulse rate to give some idea of how your fitness training is going. The idea of a Smartwatch has been kicking around for years. Indeed, Apple have been rumoured to be making one for the last 2-3 years, but it's only in the last 12 months that things have started heating up. So, what is a Smartwatch? Well, in its simplest form it's just an extension of your Smartphone. It takes some of the information you phone is providing and displays it handily on your wrist. The sort of things you would see are incoming text messages, emails and caller IDs. Basically, any notifications you would see on your phone. This can be quite useful, as it saves taking your phone out of your bag or pocket; a quick glance at your wrist and you can see if it's important or not. Other functions a basic Smartwatch can provide are controlling your music playback, and the ability to run simple companion apps. The sort of thing I am thinking of here is the ability to show directions from a mapping program running on your phone. Imagine walking around London and having the directions displayed on your wrist rather than having to wave an expensive Smartphone around. I have been using just such a device for the last year: a Pebble Smartwatch, and I am quite impressed. It has a black and white non-touch e-ink display, is fully waterproof, and lasts about a week on a single charge. You control it with four buttons and the screen is just big enough to read short messages on, without looking to big on your wrist. The Pebble connects to any Apple or Android phone, and cost around £100.

A step up from the Pebble would be the Smartwatches announced from various manufacturers running Google's Android Wear operating system. As the name implies, these devices can only connect to phones running Android and usually only talk to devices by the same manufacturer. So, a Samsung Smartwatch is only going to talk to a Samsung phone and will not work with an HTC, for instance. These devices are much more feature rich, having colour touch screens, cameras, microphones, and a whole range of other sensors to monitor things like body heat and heart rate. These devices are much bigger, but you can do more with them, which even includes making and receiving phone calls. Moreover, they can take the information from Google Now and present it to you in a timely manner. The biggest downside, apart from the size, is that most only last a day on a charge. And, for £150, this makes them a bit of a pain.

Finally, we have Apple, who after studying the market for a while have come up with their own idea of what a Smartwatch should be. The Apple Watch. It's too early to say if they have got it right as the thing's not going to be available until sometime next year, but the first indications are that it will fall in to the second group. So, it'll be a fully functioning device that probably only last a day on a charge, and costs around £300. From what little we know at the moment, it looks like Apple are trying to make their watch into a fashion device. They even have a 18 carat gold version! (In yellow and rose, too!) One interesting feature is that it supports their new Apple Pay system, so who knows, in the future we may all be paying for things with our watches!

If you have any questions or anything you would like me to cover in this column, email me at look@4-11consultants.co.uk

David runs 4-11 Consultants, a local company specialising in home and small business computer problems and can be contacted on 01206736161