



## Can User-Friendly Software Make Workers More Productive?

*Microsoft, for one, thinks so.*

By Rick Ludolph, President, Productive Solutions LLC

I realize that using the words user-friendly and Microsoft in the same title may have you questioning my judgment – or maybe even my sanity. As a recent convert to the Vista operating system, I have gained a true appreciation for those 'Mac versus PC' TV ads. But some recent comments from Chairman Bill Gates and other Microsoft executives may well have significance on how fashion companies benefit from information technology in the not-so-distant future.

At Microsoft's CEO Summit in May, Gates explained to an audience of 115 global business leaders that, even though "improved use of IT was the one reason why productivity grew so much in the 1990's, we are still only at the beginning of really empowering the workers". He emphasized the importance and opportunity of "putting information in the hands of end users in a way that they can pick how they want to view it; pick the colleagues they want to collaborate with; and they should be able in a few clicks to not only do it, but find that easy."

The essence of Mr. Gates' message was that substantial productivity gains in the future will likely come from focusing software on individual worker productivity rather than management tools. That means making information readily available to workers and enabling them to collaborate on it without "requiring the time delay or cost of IT involvement to get those things done".

Of great significance to many apparel companies, Gates contrasted commonly used desktop software with newer business productivity tools by pointing out the limitations of spreadsheets and e-mail software in today's business environment. "Spreadsheets had limitations. It wasn't really connected to the corporate database, it really couldn't hold the rich amount of information, it really didn't have the ways to navigate and visualize. When we think about information that empowers people, the most basic thing is just to have electronic mail. But that form of communication is ineffective when you get to decisions that involve groups. Simply using e-mail and having attachments and long copy lists is a very poor way to get things done."

Of course, the conference went on to inform the audience of the latest Microsoft solutions to these challenges. Nevertheless, such a stark revelation from the world's largest seller of spreadsheet and email software may serve as a wakeup call for some.

A couple of months earlier at their Convergence event, company executives were promoting the need for greater software 'desirability'. The latest Microsoft Dynamics (ERP) software has been developed with a new methodology, called 'Feel IT', which studies users' emotional reaction to software. A key focus of this effort is to make software more visually appealing by embedding images that workers identified as making the user experience more positive. The goal, of course, is to provide software that users actually want to use so that they can be more productive.

"In the beginning, there was a lot of focus on features and making applications useful", stated Jacob Nielsen, principal user experience manager at Microsoft Dynamics. "Over the last 15 to 20 years, the focus has been not only on usefulness, but usability. We're saying that may not be enough. Software should not only be usable, but the entire experience desirable."

But doesn't every vendor provider already claim to have user-friendly software? In my experience, what constitutes a user-friendly environment to programmers and technology marketers can be significantly different than what users find desirable. It is also true that some companies focus more on user productivity than others. But a few software products, particularly those developed specifically for fashion users, are already delivering highly desirable user experiences. These products are easy to spot by watching how potential end users react to software demonstrations – they can't wait to get their hands on it.

Of course, ease of use is but one factor in software selection, and perhaps not the most important. But, in my opinion, any initiative that shines a spotlight on the worker productivity aspect of software will help us all stay focused on the real opportunity of empowering our workers with the information, collaboration, and other tools they need to deliver the next wave of productivity increases that the fashion industry needs to become more competitive and flexible.

**Productive Solutions, LLC is a boutique consulting services firm specializing in the fashion industry's concept-to-delivery processes and enabling technologies. It brings a uniquely focused and personalized approach to an international client base of retailers, brands, manufacturers and vendors. Contact Rick Ludolph at [r.ludolph@productivesol.com](mailto:r.ludolph@productivesol.com) or visit [www.productivesol.com](http://www.productivesol.com).**