Microsoft Surface Hub hands-on review

- **Price When Reviewed:** 55-inch version £8,000; 84-inch version £21,000

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Every creative studio is going to want a Microsoft Surface Hub, but few will be able to justify the cost. It's a digital-whiteboard-meets-conferencing-system that both impresses and has practical benefits for creatives – whether you work for a branding or digital agency, or a visual effects or video post house. But it's also £21,000.

I got to try out the Surface Hub at Microsoft's London HQ. It's been on sale in a limited fashion for about a year, mainly to very large businesses – but now Microsoft has opened up the number of resellers, so it's only now that its available to a wider range of agencies (who can afford it).

The purpose of the Surface Hub is to be a large screen that sits in your biggest meeting room. During internal or client meetings, you can create and annotate materials related to a project – sketching ideas or wireframes; adding notes to photos, screengrabs or other images; building moodboards or

otherwise sorting research materials, and a whole bunch more. Developers can build industry-specific applications – such as tools for marking up 4K video.

The main part of the Surface Hub is an 84-inch touchscreen you can draw on with up to three specially designed pens. There's also 55-inch version that costs £5,000, but that has a much lower resolution – an HD 1,920 x 1,080 to the 84-inch version's '4K' 3,840 x 2,140 – so isn't suitable for the kind of sketching, ideation or markup you do with your clients.

The 84-inch screen lets three people draw or write comfortably at the same time without bumping shoulders (unless one of your is built like The Rock). The screen's resolution means you can sketch or write with quite a lot of detail – and images and video look relatively crisp even when you're up close drawing.

Behind the screen are the components of a modestly specced desktop computer. There's an older Intel Core i7 processor (4th generation – whereas the latest generation of laptops have 6th or 7th gen chips), 8GB of RAM, 128GB SSD and an Nvidia Quadro K2200 graphic card with 4GB of its own RAM). That would be underpowered for a computer you would use to create work, but it's fine for sketching and review – and we didn't see any performance issues when using it.

The Surface Hub runs a custom version of Windows 10, which has been tweaked for use at this size and on a wall or stand. When not in use, there's a 'lock screen' that displays the time and a list of who's booked it for current and future meetings – overlaid over some soft, well-shot photography that you can customise to fit with your branding.

Once you're into Windows itself, it's a largely familiar experience – though the Start button is at the bottom middle and there's a flip-open panels on the left and right that provides quick access to Skype for Business for video calls and messaging.

Running down the sides are speakers with a camera and two microphones embedded in each. Skype uses the camera on the opposite side from where it’s triggered – so if you’re standing on the left drawing on the screen, you won’t block the camera. And, of course, you can share the rest of the screen over Skype too.

You can run Office software like PowerPoint and Excel on the Surface Hub (yawn), but it’s the Whiteboard app that’s most exciting. This is the collaborative drawing tool that can be used for anything from note-taking to process sketching to wireframes to annotating photos or images.

Each of the three pens can be set to a different colour by tapping its point on a limited choice of colours in a palette at the bottom of the app (or you can finger-paint). You can then draw away, while putting your pen back down on something you’ve drawn or written and holding it there lets you move it around. You can import images, but not video or vector files. And you can zoom in and out almost infinitely using traditional pinch/release gestures.



If you need the Surface Hub to be mobile, you can buy a stand that puts it on wheels.
At the time, I noted that the Pen feels more like a Wacom pen than the Surface Pen that comes with the Surface Pro or Surface Book tablet/laptop hybrids – but now it seems more similar to the one with the new Surface Pro. It has a more bulbous tip but it's comfortably weighted and has an 'eraser' on the other end.

We only found a couple of issues with drawing on the Surface Hub – both when more than one person was drawing at once. The biggest flaw was a lack of per-pen undo (and no redo) – by the time I realised I'd made a mistake another journalist had drawn something else, which I inadvertently undid. So rather than just undoing a single misstroke I had to erase a whole section of what I was sketching and start again.

The other issue was more of a social than technological problem – you need to ensure someone's not about to draw when you zoom in or out (though it would be better if you could lock the zoom to avoid having the have this conversation with clients).

Once your meeting has finished, you can share the end results with participants as a flat image or editable OneNote document over email. Sharing over other collaboration tools or message platforms like Slack are possible as long they're available from the Windows Store (you can only install UWP apps on the Surface Hub through the Story – which does include Slack) and you don't mind that you have the save out the results first and can only send flat images.

Neatly, once you're done, the Surface Hub resets itself ready for your next meeting – so Client B won't inadvertently see what you were working on with Client A earlier.

Beyond Whiteboard there are a couple of other apps that will be useful to creatives. Mural is a 'digital post-it note board' and moodboard creator.

Drawboard PDF is for annotating PDFs, which will probably be more useful for feedback sessions than Whiteboard, as you can better prepare materials for such a meeting.

Beyond this, most Surface Hub apps seems aimed more at businesses, architects and engineers.

Verdict

£21,000 is a lot of money for something that's designed to replace a non-digital whiteboard that'll set you back less than £100, even if you get one on wheels. But part of owning a Surface Hub is showing off. You put one in your meeting room to sketch out ideas with your clients, deftly drop into the conversation how much it cost and watch how impressed your

clients are with how successful you are to be able to afford one. Or, on the downside, they start wondering if they’re paying you too much.