January 04, 2012

Review: iPad at Work by David Sparks -- excellent book for attorneys using an iPad

As we start a new year, lots of folks are figuring out how to make the most of an iPad. Many received a new iPad during the holidays. Some of those were upgrades to the iPad 2, which means that an original iPad was passed on to a friend or family member. And some folks have had an iPad for a while, but want to start the new year with a greater understanding of what they can do with the iPad. For any of these folks, I have an excellent recommendation — buy a copy of iPad at Work, a book by California attorney David Sparks. Sparks, who is also known as "MacSparky," runs a website by that name and co-hosts the excellent podcast Mac Power Users with Florida attorney Katie Floyd.

The publisher sent me a free copy of the book to review, and I just finished reading it last night. It is an amazing resource for anyone who is trying to get work done with an iPad, which would include every single attorney who reads iPhone J.D., and most non-attorneys as well.
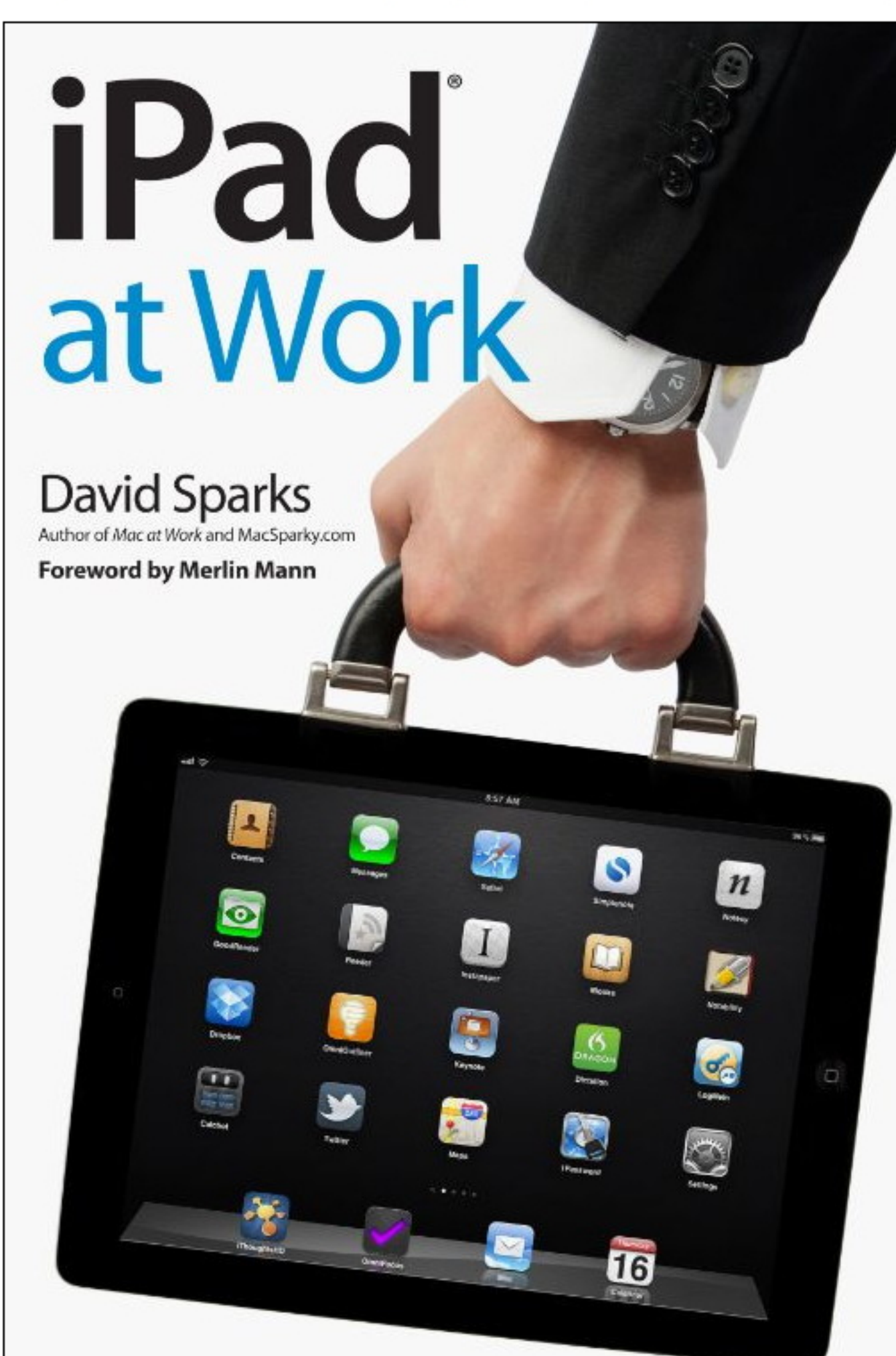
The book starts with three chapters on iPad basics, so anyone who is brand new to the iPad can read these chapters to learn the fundamentals. These chapters are useful and well-written, but the rest of the book is what really impressed me. Sparks has thought of virtually every task that a person trying to get work done with an iPad might want to undertake, as you can see from the chapter titles:

1. iPad Fundamentals
2. Useful Utilities
3. Security
4. The Internet
5. The Cloud
6. E-mail
7. Contacts
8. Calendars
9. Video Conferencing and Messaging
10. Remote Access
11. Travel
12. The Enterprise
13. Writing
14. PDFs and Your iPad
15. Reading Books
16. Notes and Meetings
17. Brainstorming
18. Presentations
19. Calculators and Spreadsheets
20. Task Management
21. Business Graphics
22. Databases
23. Project Management
24. Billing and Finance

In each chapter, Sparks identifies the strategies and the apps that you can use to get the task done, explains the features of the apps with tons of pictures, and then ends each chapter with a few paragraphs explaining the strategies and apps Sparks himself uses and why.

Some chapters include extensive discussions of key apps. For example Chapter 14 includes one of the best discussions of GoodReader that I have ever seen, and GoodReader is the first app that I tell attorneys to buy after they get an iPad. It can be a little confusing to figure out, but it does so much. As Sparks says after devoting eight pages to the app: "By now you can see why GoodReader is so popular. It does everything. You can also see why the interface can be confusing and overwhelming. It does everything." Amen to both parts of that.

Chapter 13's discussion of writing on the iPad is particularly extensive. He discusses the best word processing programs (Pages, Quickoffice Pro HD and Documents to Go), a large number of apps for working with plain text, strategies for taking notes, formatting text with Markdown, advice on collaboration tools and working with WordPerfect files, etc.

I was a little surprised that in Chapter 16, "Notes and Meetings," the only apps that he discussed for using a stylus to take notes on the iPad are Notes Plus and Penultimate, and only the first of those two apps is really appropriate for taking extensive notes during meetings. He doesn't discuss Note Taker HD, which has long been my favorite app for taking notes with a stylus. The only reason I mention this is that this book is so comprehensive that in virtually every other chapter, Sparks does a great job of identifying all of the apps that I myself would recommend, plus he recommends quite a few apps that were new to me and that I look forward to trying out.

(By the way, I've been waiting a long time to review Notes Plus here on iPhone J.D. because, ever since the Summer of 2011, the developer has been promising extensive updates in a version 3.0. That version was finally submitted to the App Store on December 31, 2011, and once it is approved and I have a chance to try it out, I'll discuss it here.)

Although Sparks is a commercial litigator, his book is aimed at a broad audience — anyone trying to get work done with an iPad. However, in the book's appendix, he identifies some key apps for certain professionals: teachers, doctors, IT professionals, real estate agents, construction professionals, and yes, attorneys. Apps for attorneys that he discusses include TrialPad, Black's Law Dictionary and Court Days Pro. Moreover, he could easily get away with marketing the book as "iPad at Work for Lawyers" because every single chapter discusses tasks that many lawyers will want to do with an iPad. Indeed, it almost seems like during the last year, while I've been writing iPhone J.D., Sparks has been writing his own website with reviews of great apps for lawyers, but instead of publishing reviews of one app at a time like I do, he waited to publish them all at one time with the apps organized by category.

This book is great not only because it covers so much, but also because Sparks has a great writing style. He is direct and easy to understand, and while he definitely gets down to business in this book, his sense of humor also shines through. For example, many of his screen shots involve a fictional business he invented for the book, Area 51 Products, LTD located in Roswell, NM, and I found myself laughing at the fake business proposals, letters from customers regarding the tin foil hats that they claim are defective, etc. Sparks clearly had fun as he was preparing the extensive graphics for this book, such as this one that appears in the discussion of Dropbox:
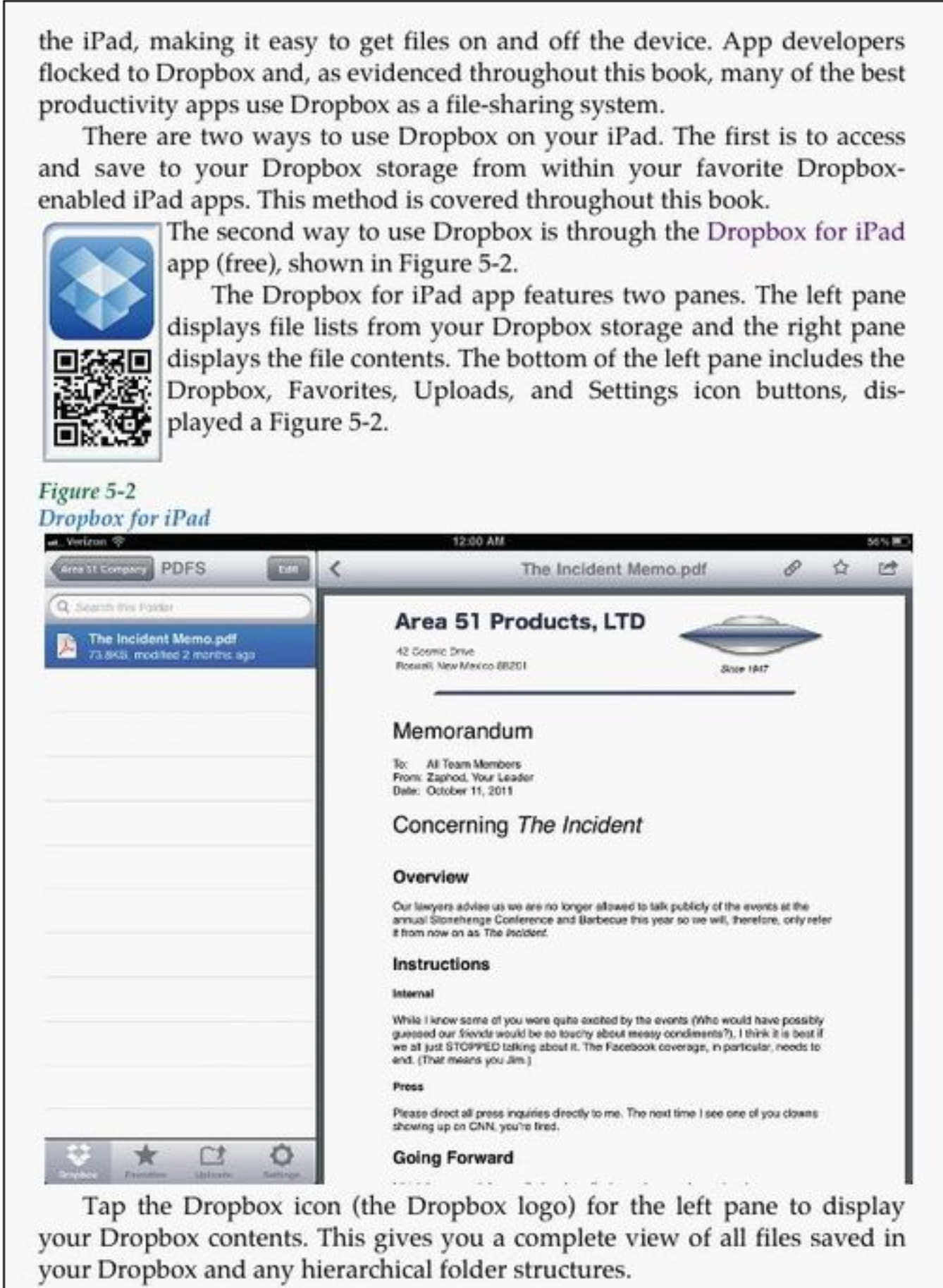
You can buy this book as a traditional paper book or as an e-book from Amazon's Kindle Bookstore or Apple's iBookstore. The printed book is beautiful, and I can understand many preferring that version so that you can go back and forth between the book and your iPad. However, since the point of this book is to get you using your iPad more often, I recommend that you get the electronic version of the book.

iPad at Work will help anyone with an iPad became much more productive. Attorneys will especially appreciate the chapters on creating and manging documents, travel, presentations, task management and remote access, but there is something for everyone in this excellent book. I have looked at quite a few iPad-related books, and there is no question that this is now the #1 book that I will recommend to any attorney looking to get more done with his or her iPad.

Click here to get iPad at Work (physical book) on Amazon ($18.25)

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