Outsourced IT

How SMBs can improve IT effectiveness while lowering costs

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The relationship between small and mid-sized businesses (SMBs) and Information Technology (IT) can often be described as a "love/hate" relationship. You absolutely rely on technology to help your business run efficiently, but IT is most likely not one of your core competencies – and just keeping your systems running can be a major undertaking that distracts you from important business-building activities.

Some SMBs rely on an in-house IT staff for computer network and IT support, but this is not always all it's cracked up to be. In-house IT staff can often be experts in the day-to-day operations of the business and network, and experienced with the company's specific Line-Of-Business Application(s). But they often do not have the time to stay current on all of the latest technologies, or be familiar with all of the Best Practices, or have access to the best network monitoring and management tools, or have enough resources to cover all of the bases. Their computer networking and IT experience is usually limited to what they have learned working for you and their last one or two employers. This often gives them a more limited perspective on overall industry trends and the "ins and outs" of available technologies. And business owners and managers often have limited insight into how well the IT staff is performing — since IT is not their core competency.

For these reasons, many savvy SMBs are choosing to outsource IT maintenance and support to an expert third-party provider. Outsourcing gives SMBs easy access to high-caliber IT support that they would not be able to afford in-house. Business owners who outsource IT support generally enjoy more stable systems, lower maintenance costs, more uptime, and less worry.

Wolf Consulting, Inc. is Pittsburgh's trusted leader in small and mid-size business computing. With over 24 years in the industry, our proactive approach, state-of-the-art management tools, experience, certifications and flat-rate services are just a few of the many reasons why our clients experience dramatically better results. Let our team of experts show you how to better your business and achieve greater success with professional IT service and support from Wolf Consulting, Inc.

The strategic advantages of outsourcing vs. full-time staff

In a very small business (say a network with less than 25 computers), it's pretty obvious that hiring a full-time IT person, let alone a full department, is not a viable option. But hiring full-time IT resources may not be the ideal choice for mid-size businesses, either (say networks with 25-200 computers). To illustrate this point, let's take a look at the costs and benefits of hiring a full-time IT staffer compared to contracting with an outsourced IT provider.

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IT Support Option	Full time IT staff member	Outsourced IT Provider
Costs	Salary, payroll taxes, insurance benefits, retirement plan contributions, vacation & sick time, education & training	Fixed monthly fee
Additional Costs	Purchase of network management and monitoring tools, antivirus protection, antispam	Included with monthly fee
Available Resources	1 person	A team of experienced, certified professionals
Experience	What they learned working for you and their last employer	Broad backgrounds and experiences
Scalability Options	None	Excellent
What Happens When There Is Employee Turnover	Must start from scratch with a new employee	Other members of the support team are already familiar
Technical Capabilities	Strong experience: • Desktop/laptop support • Line-Of-Business Applications Some experience: • Network and server administration • Security Patches and software upgrades • Data backup & recovery • Business continuity planning • Security protocols • Product selection and procurement • Project management • Software licensing Limited experience: • Network infrastructure design and implementation • Industry trends and "Best Practices" • Strategic business use of technology	Strong experience: • Desktop/laptop support • Line-Of-Business Applications • Network and server administration • Security Patches and software upgrades • Data backup & recovery • Business continuity planning • Security protocols • Product selection and procurement • Project management • Software licensing • Network infrastructure design and implementation • Industry trends and "Best Practices" • Strategic business use of technology PLUS • State-of-the-art monitoring & network management tools

As you can see from the above table, outsourced IT services generally cost less than maintaining an in-house IT staff for many SMBs – and the technical capabilities, expertise and scalability are far superior.

Finding an IT company that fits your needs

Once you've made the decision to outsource, it's time to select a provider – and you will have plenty of options. New IT providers crop up at a dizzying pace, but they're certainly not all equal – or even competent. Anyone who has a history of troubleshooting their friends' computer woes can start up an IT support company, but that doesn't mean they have the breadth of knowledge and experience to effectively manage your entire IT environment.

So how can you find an IT company that is right for you and your business? Before signing any contracts, make sure you grill potential providers on these critical points:

1. **The Basics.** How long has the company been in business? How many people will be supporting you, and who are they? Are there backups for those individuals? What is their experience? What are the certifications of the company, as well as the individual team members?
2. **Proactive approach.** A truly effective IT Company will do more than just fix what's broken. What proactive measures do they take to keep your computers systems up-and-running and performing at their best? Will they proactively manage their relationship with you, conducting periodic strategic evaluations of your technology, reviewing new options, and recommending improvements or changes? Or are they going to sit back and wait for you to come to them?
3. **What's included?** Ask potential providers about all of the services that will ultimately be needed, and which services are included with their monthly fees versus which services are billed extra. SMBs need: proactive services and reactive services; Onsite support and remote support; PC support and Server support; Easier Tier-1 helpdesk questions answered as well as Tier-2 and Tier-3 (more difficult) issues addressed. Don't be fooled by an attractive low price, only to find out later that some important needed services are billed "extra", or not provided at all.
4. **Explore philosophies.** The most common shortcoming for an outsourced IT provider is not technical expertise – it's business acumen. You want a provider that understands your business and goals and will proactively help you reach them. Ask potential providers how they will manage or recommend technology in light of your business goals, and what strategic approach they take to technology as a business tool. A business-savvy provider who gets to know your business is much more likely to point out technologies that can provide you with cost savings and enhanced efficiency.

Investigating the above areas carefully will help you select an IT service provider who will be an asset to your business for many years.

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Consider a hybrid solution

Even if you have an in-house IT solution that works for you, you might benefit from adding an outsourced solution to supplement your existing support. The advantages of a hybrid scenario include:

- Adding a new level of knowledge and experience
- Knowledge of "best practices" and industry trends
- Access to Tier-2 and Tier-3 (higher level) technical support
- Covering in-house staff shortages
- Handling and managing special projects
- State-of-the-art network monitoring and management tools
- Regularly scheduled strategic IT review & planning discussions
- Freeing up your in-house team to focus on tasks more essential to core business operations.

Happily ever after

Outsourcing IT support can be a win/win for many SMBs. If the relationship is entered into carefully, an outsourced provider can offer far superior tools and technical expertise at approximately the same cost as (or even less than) full-time resources – without the overhead, HR paperwork, management head-aches, or sick days. The right provider will show you ways to use technology to lower costs and increase productivity for greater payback on your IT investments.

To find out more about outsourced IT support services, call the experienced, certified professionals at Wolf Consulting, Inc. at 724-325-2900, or visit www.WolfConsulting.com.

Wolf Consulting, Inc.
3875 Franklintowne Court
Suite 110
Murrysville, PA 15668

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www.WolfConsulting.com