E-NEWS

An SMB's IT hardware checklist

Imagine going back to the office after a long vacation, only to be greeted by a messy workstation. Frustrating, isn't it? If your enterprise wants to start a new year working with clean, organized technology, this IT hardware checklist is just what you need.

- **Clean up your computer components**

Wipe your monitor with clean, static-free fabric; remove excess dirt from your mouse's exterior; and tidy up your keyboard with compressed air. Don't forget your computer tower! Dust buildup can block your computer's air vent and affect its performance. Ensure that your workstation is getting adequate ventilation and isn't directly exposed to sunlight and other heat sources.

- **Manage your cables**

If you're not giving your computers' cables the attention they deserve, now's a good time to do so. Other than wiping the thick coat of dust off of computer cables, consider using cable management solutions that unclutter and untangle messy wires. These don't just organize and secure your cables, they also help ensure your PCs run quieter and are less prone to overheating as a result of blocked air vents.

Planning to relocate or upgrade in the near future? Organizing your computers' cables now makes future relocation and upgrading processes much easier.

- **Review and update your inventory**

Keeping an inventory of all your hardware helps you manage hardware life cycles and purchases, identify items that are near their end of life, and ensure you avoid duplicate purchases of items already in stock.

Your inventory list should include all owned and leased devices: PCs and laptops, printers and scanners, tablets and smartphones, and modems and other network hardware. Update all your assets' serial numbers and keep track of their respective users and location.

- **Printer maintenance**

Clean the interiors and exteriors of your printers, including paper trays, which are sure to have accumulated dirt from years of use. You should also repair and/or replace parts and accessories such as print heads and cartridges that are no longer in good condition. Should you decide to do a complete printer maintenance, check for the latest software updates for your printers and install them immediately.

- **Implement a hardware policy**

This is also a good time to create a technology guideline that your employees can follow to ensure they work efficiently. These guidelines reduce the need to spend on unnecessary repairs, keeping the succeeding year's checklist shorter. With clear instructions on the proper use, replacement, and storage of your hardware and devices, you'll be better able to manage your hardware for years to come.

With a more organized IT hardware inventory, you have one less thing to worry about. Want to get more in-depth hardware management advice? Call our experts today.

How Windows 10 features keep ransomware at bay

The ransomware threat isn't going away anytime soon, which is bad news for computer users everywhere. Fortunately, Windows 10 has built-in security features to keep you from falling victim to ransomware.

Controlled Folder Access

This feature allows you to list certain documents and folders as "protected." Only whitelisted programs can access and edit these folders, while any attempts by malicious apps to change the folders are blocked by Windows Defender.

In theory, this should slow down a ransomware's ability to encrypt critical information. Some reports suggest that this feature can also prevent other threats like malicious file macros and viruses.

You can access the feature by going to Windows Defender Security Center and then enabling "Controlled folder access." From there, you can choose which folders will be protected and what apps are allowed to access them. To save you time, common Microsoft applications are trusted automatically, but you can remove them from your whitelist whenever you want.

Application Guard

Windows Defender Application Guard is designed to prevent intrusions by using Microsoft's Hyper-V virtual machine technology to detect and isolate compromised applications from the rest of your system. So if someone on your staff accidentally downloads a virus from their web browser, Application Guard will contain the threat before it infiltrates the rest of your company's devices, apps, data, and network.

Device Guard

Similarly, Windows 10's Device Guard feature, which is also found in Windows Defender Security Center, minimizes your PC's exposure to malware by using advanced threat detection policies. It blocks all apps that are not considered to be trusted, ensuring that only approved code is running throughout the system. It also adds an extra layer of defense between your firewall and antivirus software.

Make the most out of your O365 subscription

It may seem as if Office 365 is merely Microsoft's way of joining the online subscription bandwagon, but that's not the case. O365 is Microsoft's way of upgrading its ubiquitous Office suite by augmenting it with cloud features.

Office apps and the files you create with them are accessible wherever there's an internet connection, but that is actually the bare minimum that O365 offers. If you go for either the Premium or Essentials bundle, you'll gain access to communications and collaboration apps that you can use to increase your organization's productivity. Here are some of the specific ways you can do this:

Build an engaging intranet using SharePoint

Unlike the internet, which is a megalithic network spanning the entire world, an intranet is basically a private network built for your employees' exclusive use. It began as a repository for basic company information, then it evolved into a document management system, an HR portal (where staff can file leaves of absence), a platform for knowledge-sharing and discussion forums, and a social media platform where users are both consumers and pushers of company-centric content.

If you use Microsoft Word and Excel to create work files, SharePoint is the platform where your team can keep and share such files. engage with the goings-inside the company.

Build forums that bolster collaboration, information libraries that help staff leverage collective knowledge, and message boards that inform and invite staff to engage with the goings-on inside the company.

Enjoy continuous collaboration with Teams

Microsoft brings collaborations up a notch with Teams, a tool that allows you to build shared workspaces. In a Teams workspace, each team member can share files as well as comment on and work on one another's files. Imagine doing all of that via email — you'll most likely weave a nightmarish tangle out of multiple threads and attachments.

Additionally, Teams has communications facilities such as web conferencing, group chat, and live online meetings. Since Teams can be used on desktops, laptops, and mobile devices, workers can share information and connect frontline staff such as factory machine operators and sales clerks.

Coordinate your efforts with Planner

If Teams is O365's communications hub, then Planner is its Kanban board — a project workflow visualization tool that lets you categorize tasks according to their progress status. A physical Kanban board is limited by the size of sticky notes used, but with Planner, you can assign tasks to team members, attach relevant files to them, and discuss tasks without leaving the app.

Automate tasks with Flow

There are tasks that promote critical thinking, but there are also tasks that are tedious and repetitive. An example of such a task is preparing an income statement. This usually involves emailing a finalized income statement to your superiors and archiving it. Automating the archive step alone would significantly ease this workflow.

With Flow, you can easily create detailed workflows that accomplish tasks automatically once you fulfill certain triggers. You can also make different apps "talk" with one another (e.g., have new OneDrive files be copied to your Dropbox account), provided that integrations allow them to do so. Imagine not having to shift between so many apps anymore — this will save your staff plenty of time and mindspace to do more worthwhile tasks that add more value to your company.

Best practices for virtualization first-timers

Virtualization's benefits are numerous: centralized IT management, faster hardware resources, improved business continuity, and reduced overhead costs. It makes perfect sense for everyone to jump on board. But to maximize virtualization's benefits, beginners should start doing the following best practices.

Conduct an assessment

Evaluating your IT environment is an important step in the implementation process. After all, you can't just go around virtualizing everything without a plan. An IT assessment performed by an impartial managed services provider (MSP) like us helps you understand what type of virtualization solution you need.

For example, if the report shows that your computers don't have enough processing power to run certain apps, desktop virtualization — which consolidates operating systems and apps into a single powerful server — is an ideal solution.

From there, you should be able to estimate costs and set realistic timelines for its implementation.

Don't forget about hardware

Just because virtualization frees up space in your server room, does not mean hardware is no longer an issue. No matter what type of solution you opt for, the servers you use must be strong enough to support the entire company's computing demands.

This means you must take stock of your apps and their hardware requirements and make sure your server has all the processing power, RAM, network capacity, and storage necessary to run them.

Underutilized servers are excellent candidates for virtualization, but purchasing new equipment may pay dividends in the long run. If you choose the latter option, ask your provider for recommendations. Chances are they're partnered with virtualization-optimized hardware vendors that offer top-of-the-line servers.

Prevent VM sprawl

Virtualization allows you to deliver computing resources to workstations in your network via virtual machines (VMs), which can be created on a server in just a few minutes. While this lets you scale and provision resources quickly, there are risks if you don't have someone regularly reviewing which VMs are worthwhile and which are outdated. You could be losing out on cost savings and efficiency benefits.

When too many VMs are created, they can quickly consume server resources and complicate licensing and asset management.

To prevent sprawl, you must establish policies and restrictions for VM creation. For instance, users must have a solid justification for creating a VM (e.g., testing software or provisioning apps for new users).

Prioritize business continuity

You must also protect the hardware running your virtual servers. Make sure to lock up server rooms and have secondary servers available in case the first one breaks down. While you're at it, take advantage of automated backup solutions that make copies of your VMs and their files regularly.

Work with experts

Building and maintaining a virtual infrastructure is no simple task. That's why you'll want to work with a virtualization specialist who can guarantee a seamless implementation and provide continuous management services.