



Ten Ways Small Businesses Can
Minimize Computer Headaches
And Lower Their IT Costs
Without Sacrificing Performance

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Introduction

Small businesses have unique needs and constraints that they must consider when planning and operating their business – one of the most important of which is their budget. From our experience in managing the technology of small businesses in a wide variety of industries, we have developed a number of best practices that can help you save money without sacrificing performance.

Our belief is that technology doesn't have to be complicated, and that thoughtful management practices and a focus on keeping things simple will result in lower costs. In fact, the recommendations themselves are simple; so simple that most businesses tend to neglect them.

Practice these fundamentals and lower your information technology costs this year!

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The Ten Fundamentals

1. Standardize your hardware, software, and policies
2. Keep business computers for business use only
3. Keep current spam, virus, and spyware protection on all machines
4. Buy slightly ahead of the curve when purchasing hardware
5. Buy slightly behind the curve when purchasing software
6. Use industry-leading products
7. Use cloud or hosted services
8. Have a good backup plan
9. Perform regular maintenance on your network and computers
10. Choose the right technology support for your business

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Standardize your hardware, software, and policies

How does standardizing save you money? Simple: efficient troubleshooting and support.

If every piece of hardware and software at your business is different, you suffer a variability tax each time there is a problem with a computer on your network. If there are no standards, every problem takes longer to identify, investigate and solve no matter how familiar a technician is with your network setup. Ultimately, the problem will cost you more to fix whether you bring in a consultant to investigate, spend your own time, or have an internal employee solve the problem.

As an example, each time a technician looks at a problem, he must find the answers to the questions like these:

- What is the model of computer we are working on?
- Which version of Microsoft operating system is being used?
- Which version of Microsoft Office is being used?
- Has the latest service pack been installed?
- Do they have a current antivirus tool on the computer?

Having the answers to these questions is critical to solving a problem and standardizing these factors across your computers will save you time and money.

By standardizing the vendor and computer type used within your company, replacing broken hardware becomes easier as well. If every computer you buy is different, replacing parts becomes an investigation requiring opening up the computer, finding purchasing records, and determining if parts for that computer are standard. This ultimately costs your organization real dollars in time and effort. If every computer you purchase is the same, it's easy to keep a small inventory of spare parts on hand and reorder quickly as necessary.

How do you standardize?

If possible, order all of your computers at one time. Larger companies do this technical refresh process every few years. Putting everything on a three-year lease is a nice way to spread out the expense.

If purchasing everything at once isn't possible, make sure you purchase only business-class computers, and always get the same model. Identify computers that are older and put a phased purchasing plan in place to replace the older computers over time. The components in the machine will then be easier to inventory, replace, and manage.

Finally, use the same version of operating system and Microsoft Office suite on each computer. Don't upgrade one without upgrading the others.

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Keep business computers for business use only

It's amazing how many businesses give their employees free reign on their computers without a clear understanding of how much this freedom is costing their business in support dollars and lost productivity.

The vast majority of personal purchases made on the Internet are made where? At work.

Where do you think all of the viruses and spyware that make it to your network are coming from? They're coming primarily from personal email use and surfing of unsavory websites.

They're also coming from other software downloads that people just love to put on their computers: Kazaa, Weatherbug, and screen savers, to name a few. These programs often leave an unsecured back door open on your network, and always use valuable memory and processing resources on your computer.

Put a policy in place that clearly defines good use of company computer resources so that employees are aware of the boundaries.

Better yet, use a tool that allows you to track which sites people are surfing throughout the day, block access to specific websites as you see fit, and prevent unwanted downloads to your network.

Obviously, you need to decide how much of a "Big Brother" approach is right for your business environment, but you should realize that every bit of additional leeway you give is costing you money. Make it clear to your employees that business tools are for business use.

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Keep current spam, virus, and spyware protection on all machines

Problems caused by spam, viruses, and spyware cost US small businesses billions of dollars each year, and each instance can cause thousands of dollars in clean-up fees.

The tools to defend against these malicious programs are not expensive, and will more than pay for themselves in productivity gains in the first month of use.

Don't put any new computer – including those of temporary visitors such as friends or vendors - on your network unless it has all of the appropriate protection in place.

Unfortunately, the software alone won't prevent every new attack – that will require your employees' cooperation by following some rules of email and Internet use. Publish a list of tips employees should use to determine if they should open a suspicious email or attachment. Here are examples to get you started:

- Don't open email sent from an unknown source
- Don't open any attachments from an unknown source
- Don't open attachments that have unusual file extensions such as .VBS, .SHS, or .PIF. Also don't open attachments that have multiple extensions such as NAME.BMP.EXE
- Make sure your Internet browser settings are at least at the Medium level
- Don't download files from suspect web sites
- Don't engage in mass email forwarding of jokes, chain letters, etc.
- Don't use your business email address to sign up for non-business websites, newsletters, etc.

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Buy slightly ahead of the curve when purchasing hardware

You don't necessarily need to buy the most cutting-edge software for your business, but it usually makes no sense to skimp on hardware.

The fundamental hardware components that will have the greatest impact on performance include processors, memory, and hard drives. These components allow you to churn through the constantly growing software and data processing demands put on your computer.

The applications and amount of data being used on your computer are growing in size exponentially each year. If you don't buy ahead of the curve now, you are going to shorten the useable life of the machine.

Nobody enjoys trying to work on a slow machine. Everyone has had the painful experience of trying to do work on a machine that has to crunch for a full minute every time you ask it to do something.

How much does that lost productivity cost your business?

Buy slightly behind the curve when purchasing software

Your strategy when purchasing software should be exactly the opposite of that when buying hardware: Don't buy brand new software releases.

New software releases mean bugs! Microsoft, in particular, is famously guilty of throwing new software releases into the marketplace before they have been thoroughly tested, but every vendor is guilty.

Sure, they'll entice you with the promise of the latest bells and whistles that will make your business purr like a finely tuned car, but reality is usually far different. Hang on to your older version for an extra six months to one year, and let somebody else work the kinks out.

Don't be the guinea pig for new software releases.

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Use industry-leading products

The hardware and software tools you choose play a crucial role in the success of your business. These mission-critical systems are no place to experiment with unproven products. Buy the name brand products that are recognized leaders of the product category you are purchasing.

Sure, we all wish we could save a buck or two by dumping Microsoft for the latest version of free Linux software, but it just isn't realistic to do so. By saving a few hundred dollars on a Microsoft Office license, you will spend countless dollars struggling to find appropriate support and compatible products.

Give your employees the appropriate tools and they'll more than make up for it in increased productivity.

Use cloud or hosted services

The benefits of cloud and hosting services to small businesses can be huge. Cloud and hosted environments remove a lot of the technology management burden from your business, and can make licensing and upgrades a non-issue.

Not every application or service can be removed from your local environment, but an increasing number can. CRM systems, email, project management tools – even phone systems – can all now be provided as a hosted or cloud-based service.

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Have a good backup plan

Every business should have a reliable, robust backup plan in place. Your company data is one of the most valuable assets of your business and must be protected.

A good backup plan starts with the organization of your data. It is critical that you have clear company-wide policies that address where data should be saved; otherwise, you'll have no idea if you are really backing up all of your data or not.

Most businesses put in a tape back-up system and assume their data is now safe. While it may seem that having this system in place should be enough to protect you, unfortunately, it is not.

Why? Tapes are unreliable.

First, you are lucky if a tape backup is actually backing up everything properly. Tape back-up software is finicky, and if it sees a file it doesn't like, it often rejects it and moves on.

Second, even if your data was backed up, the chances of recovering everything you want from a tape are not good. The tapes are not much more sophisticated than those you used to play in your car's cassette deck. Remember what happened to those? They stretched, broke, wore out – all things that make it hard to recover data.

So what is a small business to do?

Supplementing your tape backup system with Internet backup is often the answer. The cost of Internet backup has decreased dramatically over the years and the technology used has continued to advance, making it a good option to protect your company's mission-critical data. Your data will be compressed to eliminate bandwidth concerns, encrypted to eliminate security concerns, and sent off-site to a secure facility. Then, when you need it, you just access a website and choose the file you would like to restore.

In addition, there are very good systems that provide local backup without relying on tape. Your data can be stored on a hard drive array that is dedicated to performing backup for your company – this is much faster and more reliable than tape.

No single backup system is 100% reliable. Work with your IT service provider to outline a solution that gives you the protection you need.

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Perform regular maintenance

Your network, and the computer systems that make up your network, should be thought of like a car: they need regular maintenance to keep running. Yes, you can get away with not changing the oil in your car, but sooner or later you are going to run into a very expensive problem.

This same thinking applies to your technology. If you don't perform ongoing maintenance, you are going to have a very expensive, very frustrating situation occur that will make the cost savings you achieved from not doing maintenance seem insignificant.

What things need to be worked on or monitored on a regular basis?

- Check that virus software is running and is up-to-date
- Run a full virus scan each day
- Monitor your firewall for security breaches
- Monitor your backup for success
- Install tested Microsoft patches and service packs
- Check that your web browser is up-to-date with security patches
- Clear temp files and downloaded program files
- Check that you have sufficient disk space available
- Set your system to run a disk defrag once a quarter and allow it to run overnight

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Choose the right technology support for your business

Most small businesses think that there are only two technology support options available: a full-time employee or a contract with an hourly consultant.

Neither of these options works well.

The majority of small businesses do not need a full-time employee to manage their technology. In fact, having one is usually a big mistake.

Why? First, the cost of a full-time employee is too much of a burden for the value the business is receiving. Most work that needs to be done on a small business network is fairly routine and much of it can be automated. The cost of a full time employee will usually be better spent on something else in your business.

Second, you are getting a person who, if they are any good at managing and supporting a network, is going to be bored senseless within a few months. Managing a small network is not rocket science. How do you expect them to stay challenged? Once they get bored, they get stale. They stop learning and growing, and your business is left with a tired resource that is no longer actively engaged in making your business better.

Another business factor to consider when hiring a single resource to manage your network is breadth of knowledge. The best Network Managers are the ones that have experience with hundreds of business networks and can keep an eye on the strategic business needs of a company when making technology decisions versus just fixing immediate problems. A single employee will not likely have this breadth of experience.

Most businesses think their only other option is to have an hourly consultant support their technology, but this is often a mistake too.

Most businesses use their hourly consultant to fix problems that have already occurred (known as “break-fix” work). Ask yourself the following question: What is their incentive to make your computers and network work efficiently, when the result is that you’ll stop calling them with problems and they’ll lose billable hours? None!

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A third and more beneficial model is a vendor who will manage your network and provide routine support for a flat fee.

The most obvious benefit of the flat fee support model is that the service provider's incentives are now in line with yours, as they won't have any extra financial gain for a network that is performing poorly. In fact, the only way the flat fee service provider can make a profit is by proactively reducing network problems through more effective management.

The majority of the routine network management tasks and user support that take place when maintaining a network do not require a person to be at your office. Remote control technologies and network monitoring and management tools that work over the Internet mean that a team of centralized technicians with the right resources can support many businesses without the wasted time and expense of travel.

Additional budget will then be available for hardware, software, and true consulting services that can help take your business to the next level.

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