

Small Business Networking



Why a network is an essential productivity tool for any small business

Effective technology is essential for small businesses looking to increase the productivity of their people and business. Introducing technology such as a computer networks can help them to stay competitive by increasing productivity and by reducing hardware costs. Even simple networks make sharing information and resources easier, provide better security and enable easy backup facilities for any small businesses.

Why a network is essential for your small business

One of the primary challenges small business owners face is to get the right technology into their business. However getting the most of this technology investment is still a big challenge for many small businesses. For example, the business may have started with a single computer and printer but as the business grew, more PC's and other peripherals are added. As a result, the demand for printers and other hardware devices increases and sharing becomes more problematic. Rather than purchasing separate hardware peripherals for each computer, a network provides the solution for a single printer to be shared among computers. Networking of computers is essential as the business grows larger. If the small business has more than one computer, the networking the computers can make the difference in smoother operations. In fact, a network becomes the foundation for a productive and secure small business operation.

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What is a network?

A network is a system containing any combination of computers, printers, fax machines, data storage, audio or visual display devices, or telephones interconnected by cables used to transmit or receive information.

Two Types of Networks: Peer-to-Peer and Client/Server

Peer-to-Peer networking

A peer-to-peer network is the most basic type of network that allows multiple users to share information or resources such as printers and scanners. In a peer-to-peer network, each computer is connected directly to the other computers with each treated equal on the network. Each computer can share resources or information with any other computer on the network without a centralized computer or server. In this type of network, each connected computer has an equal responsibility and role.

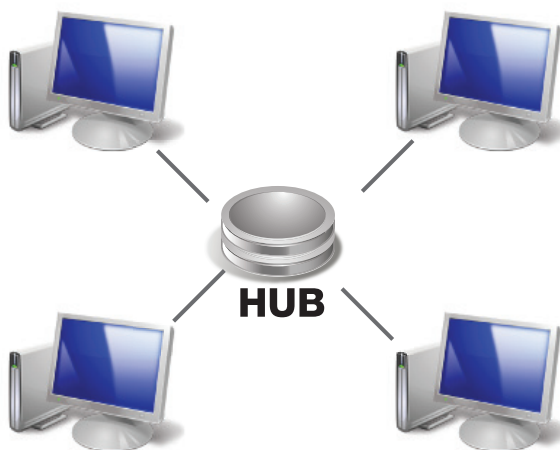


Figure 1: Peer to Peer Network

Client/Server networking

In a client-server network, all computers are connected to the server or centralized computer. A single computer called a server is used to manage the entire network and stores shared information in a central location. Servers are run with specific server software designed to manage the computer network and serve as a central place to store data. The clients in the network can be an individual computer, printer, scanner or any other device. The server software performs specific tasks such as file sharing, printer sharing, connecting multiple users to the internet or sending and receiving e-mail for each of the network's client.

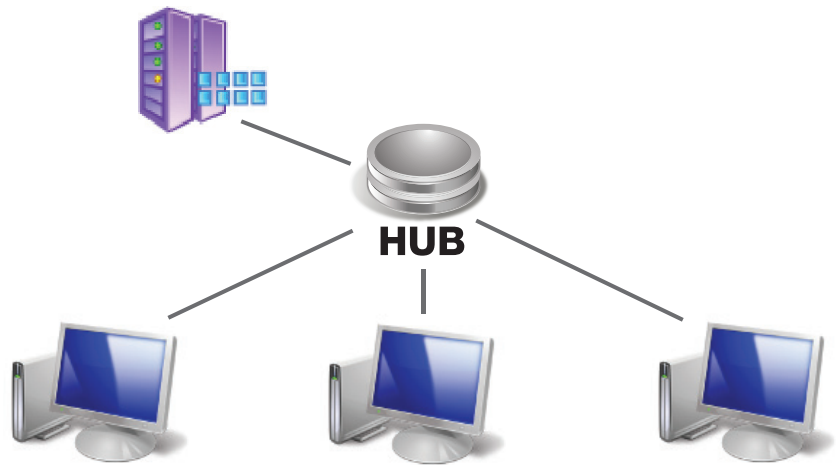


Figure 2: Client/Server Network

Peer-to-Peer vs. Client/Server Network

Both of these networks serve the same purpose of allowing multiple users to share and exchange information and resources with each other. But the functions and benefits differ widely.

Peer-to-Peer networks are simple to configure, easy to install and certainly a low-cost solution but are very limited in the functions they can perform. For example, peer-to-peer networks have no centralized location to store the information because the information and resources are shared from one computer to another. In the event one computer shuts down, other computers cannot access the data stored in that computer.

One major downside of this type of network is that it has no centralized security safeguards so it is relatively insecure. Anybody connected to the network can get access to the just a few PCs and few security concerns. In case more than five or so PC's are connected to the network it has the tendency to go slow.

Client/server network can remarkably improve the business performance because of the different functions it can perform. The server can back up information saving time and preventing data loss as well as providing security for information. As server acts as single centralized unit for whole of the network so internet connection can be easily monitored and controlled. Another advantage is that performance of computers improves because computers don't perform functions such as storing large amounts of data for other computers. This allows the client computers to run faster. Besides this, in client/server network there is single point of access for the entire network so users are not dependent on each other's computers as they are in a peer-to-peer network. Servers also increase the security of the vital data like financial information by allowing controlled access to different users. Hence if the small business has more than five computers then centralizing the network on a server allows the small business owners to have tools and services that can help to attain impressive time and cost savings.

6 Ways a Network Can Influence Small Business Performance

Collaboration: A network allows employees to share and exchange information. A network provides access to variety of tools by which employees can communicate with each other. Besides this it also offers collaboration features and allows multiple users to contribute to a single document which is otherwise not possible with individual computers.

File sharing: A network makes it possible to access a file stored on another computer. Multiple users can share same files so it eliminates the need of creating and managing multiple versions.

Printer/Fax sharing: Several computers can share the same printer or fax machine if computers are connected through a network. As a result, there is no need of buying and connecting separate printers and devices to every company computer.

Data protection: Backing-up data is essential for a business to prevent loss of valuable business information. With a network it becomes routine and secure to back up the company data ready for retrieval when necessary

Shared Internet access: With a network it becomes possible to share a single internet connection among multiple computers. In-house e-mail systems can also be easily implemented with client/server network.

Increases the productivity, reduces costs and saves time: When a small business has computer network it increases the productivity of employees and reduces costs. With a network, multiple employees can share the company resources such as printers, fax machines or any other hardware device. Multiple users can access the internet at the same time. Consequently the hardware costs of the company are reduced and productivity of employees is increased. A network also helps save time by providing easy back up solutions.

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Payback Period of Network

Small business owners can reap enormous benefits by networking their computers. But sometimes concerns about hardware, software and installation costs of networks (particularly client/server networks) became a main deterrent in adoption of this technology. But the network technology starts paying quickly in form of increased employee productivity and reduced operating costs.

According to a study conducted by Forbes*, small business owners are quickly recovering investments and realizing enormous benefits from server technology. Small businesses using server networks find that their employees can now perform an average of 20 percent more revenue-producing tasks. The study has shown that average payback period of server network ranges from 2.4 to 4.9 months. Most small businesses were able to recover their hardware and software investments in less than 2.5 months. The survey concluded that server networks are helping smaller firms extend their geographic reach, find new customers, and increase revenues while holding costs steady or decreasing them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, peer-to-peer network is cheaper and easier to implement and maintain, but client/server network can be much more useful for a small business as it leads to greater productivity, security and lower costs .

Recommendations:

Check out the following before you go for network solutions:

- ✓ A network can make a difference if your small business has more than one computer and your employees feel the need to share printers, scanners etc., share an internet connection and computer files.
- ✓ It would be more feasible for you to establish peer-to-peer network if you have five or less than five PCs in your office.
- ✓ If you more than five PCs, the client/ server network is likely suitable for your company.
- ✓ Windows Small Business Server 2008 can be a right and affordable network solution for establishing client/ server network in your company, if you have two to seventy five computers in your company. It provides you file and printer sharing facilities, internet connection-sharing capabilities, secure internet connectivity, support for your mobile devices, easy backup and restore facilities and many other advanced features.

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Managed IT Services

Eliminating technology pains in small businesses



Having a complete IT department is not a viable solution for most small businesses, and very few small companies can afford to deploy even one permanent IT employee. Fortunately, there is an emerging and quickly growing service known as “Managed IT Services” to help.

For small businesses in today's high-tech society, Information Technology (IT) has become a significant consideration. Small business owners are under constant pressure to conduct business more efficiently and improve the productivity of its employees, while at the same time reduce costs. In addition to these normal business challenges, many small businesses are frustrated by the difficulties of dealing with new emerging technologies. Implementing new technology is a challenging job for small business owners and can cause numerous difficulties in day-to-day operations. Computers often are struck with problems such as spam, virus, and security threats, and server and email access malfunctions cause employees to sit idle. Company systems often do not operate at their optimal level to fully satisfy the business needs, and a huge amount of downtime is experienced waiting for technicians to come and solve each problem. These small system disruptions and downtime add up, and greatly affect the revenue of the company. The bottom line is: most small companies today do not experience the best performance possible from their IT applications.

The growth of small businesses is often slowed down by lack of handling of IT infrastructure properly. Instead of focusing on revenue generating activities, small business owners are stuck trying to find solutions for

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“...Managed services provide affordable solutions to the complex technology problems of small businesses for a fixed monthly fee.”

technology problems. As smaller companies are increasingly becoming more dependent on IT systems, it has become very crucial to find cost effective ways to manage technology. Growth-oriented companies need a well-organized IT infrastructure so that they can focus on the business instead of trying to solve IT failures. However, having a complete IT department is not a viable solution for most small businesses, and very few small companies can afford to deploy even one permanent IT employee. Fortunately, there is an emerging and quickly growing service known as “Managed IT Services” that is proving to be quite helpful in managing small business technology.

What are Managed IT Services?

Managed IT services are provided by an outside firm or IT consulting company. These days, a growing number of IT vendors, resellers, and telecom carriers are providing managed services based on remote, proactive monitoring of company networks on an ongoing basis – with minimal involvement of the small business owners. Managed Service Providers (MSPs) employ consultants who specialize in small business networks, computer support, and security. Generally, managed IT services are delivered from a remote location via the Internet, but on-site proactive and emergency services are also provided when necessary. Services range from basic monitoring to fully managed services. Overall support for day-to-day operations and on-demand support for any other major need is also provided by these IT consulting groups. Managed services are usually provided on flat monthly fee or per device basis.

Types of services

There is growing variety of services that are provided by IT consultants or Managed Service Providers. Broad categories include:

- Computer & Server Support
- Data Backup & Disaster Recovery
- Network Security
- Custom Software Solutions
- Remote Network Monitoring
- Technology Evaluation & Planning

Computer & Server Support

Regular maintenance and monitoring of company computers is essential to optimized desktop performance. IT consulting companies offer various solutions for ensuring that computers are functioning properly and are protected against all of the latest technology threats and disasters. Consultants also provide troubleshooting services and recommendations to prevent the same problem from happening again. Solutions also include server installation and administration.

Remote Network Monitoring

Remote monitoring of the critical components of a network such as servers and firewalls is also provided by managed service providers. Consultants troubleshoot problems remotely to minimize network downtime. With automatic alerting systems, issues are resolved before they can significantly impact network performance.

Data Backup & Disaster Recovery

Backing up data is essential and should not be ignored, yet many small businesses do not perform backups. In a remote backup facility, a backup of files is made regularly over the Internet, and files are stored in a secure, off-site data storage facility, requiring no tape or hardware. Remote Backup and Online Backup Services help small businesses avert data loss in case of any disaster.

Network Security

Small businesses need computer and network security even more than large businesses. This is because small businesses are often the primary target of hackers who can more easily attack the smaller networks. IT consulting companies provide tools and practices such as spam management and firewall management to help protect the small businesses from hackers, viruses, and spam.

“
...Managed IT Services help small business owners by simplifying IT operations and improving the reliability of networks. Instead of spending time worrying about technology, small business owners can stay focused on growing their businesses.”

Custom Software Solutions

IT consultants recommend and provide custom designed software solutions according to the unique needs of each small business. Depending on the project needs and requirements, IT consultants help small businesses determine the technology best suited to their business needs.

Technology Evaluation & Planning

Most small business owners employ an “ad-hoc” approach to dealing with technology, with no long term plan for future technology needs. IT consulting companies provide a comprehensive computer and network assessment, and evaluate the current IT setup to suggest possible changes to maximize technology effectiveness for the small business.

Break/Fix model vs. Managed Services: Key Benefits of Managed Services

Most small companies use the “break/fix model” of technology management: when technology fails, a consultant is called in to fix the problem and the company pays a fee for the service. This method results in repeated downtime and lost productivity. The problem with this model is that consultants are not motivated to keep the client’s network and systems running efficiently because the consultant makes more money when the technology breaks down.

Small business owners should consider the managed IT services solution for several reasons. Managed services provide affordable solutions to the complex technology problems of small businesses for a fixed monthly fee. Technology experts are fully focused on keeping the systems of the company up and running because repeated technology failures means higher costs to them. Therefore, the managed services model is beneficial to both the client and the technology expert because small businesses have the advantage of lower rates and better services while technology experts get the fixed monthly fee from multiple customers.

With managed services, small business owners have access to external technology experts who are constantly available to monitor and fix company networks. Managed IT services also provide small businesses with access to a wide array of tools that are normally assets of larger companies only. By letting IT consultants manage their technology, small businesses can keep the network protected against the latest security breaches, as well as reap the benefits of a larger IT team working for their company at very little cost.

With remote monitoring and maintenance of the network, technology problems are resolved before they can disrupt the business, and network and hardware performance is greatly improved, with a significant decrease in network downtime. This increased efficiency leads to increased employee productivity and optimized return on investment (ROI).

Managed IT Services help small business owners by simplifying IT operations and improving the reliability of networks. Instead of spending time worrying about technology, small business owners can stay focused on growing their businesses.

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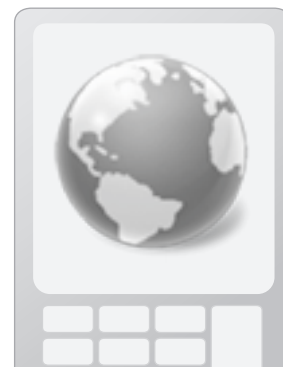
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Small Business Mobility

Enabling your team to work anywhere, anytime



More than 50 million US workers are considered mobile, spending at least 20% of the time away from their primary workspace¹.

Mobile technology is becoming increasingly vital to your small business as the number of employees working from home or away from the office is growing significantly. More than 50 million US workers are considered mobile, spending at least 20% of the time away from their primary workspace¹. Some of your employees, such as your salespeople or representatives, may be constantly on the move.

Today, productivity in and out of the office is imperative to keeping your small business running efficiently and gaining a competitive edge. For example, when you or your team are away from the office without connectivity and need important information, that time often proves to be unproductive and wasteful. However, if you connect your mobile workers to your company network through mobile devices such as mobile phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs), you can enable them to maintain a continuous workflow on the road or from home. Investing in mobility solutions will maximize the productivity of your employees. Mobility is essential for your business since your employees and your customers require anytime/anywhere access to each other and vital information.

What is Mobility?

Mobility is the ability to access your office information and data remotely, and to conduct business anywhere, anytime. Mobility solutions provide mobile and remote access to your company data and e-mail.

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¹ Yankee Group Study, "Maximizing Mobile Worker Productivity," 2008

How Can Your Small Business “Go Mobile”?

Today’s technology offers a broad array of solutions to the various mobility needs of your small business. One of the areas your employees can greatly benefit from is wireless technology solutions. There are three main wireless technologies in use today: Wi-Fi (Wireless Fidelity), Cellular Internet, and Bluetooth technology.

- **Wi-Fi:** Wireless Fidelity is the most widely used wireless technology.
- **Cellular Technology:** Includes technologies such as GPRS, (General Packet Radio Services), EV-DO (Evolution Data Optimized).
- **Bluetooth:** Used for short-range wireless connections (up to 10 metres). Bluetooth can be used for connecting your office computers, printers, and other peripherals.

To mobilize your business, you will need to connect your mobile devices such as cell phones, smartphones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and wireless-enabled (Wi-Fi) laptops to your company network using any of these wireless technologies.

Mobile Devices for your business

- **Mobile Phones**—Your employees can use their mobile phones not only for voicemail and SMS, but for email also. Every Internet-enabled phone can provide your employees anytime/anywhere access to their mail. Most mobile phones connect through cellular technologies such as GPRS and EV-DO.
- **Laptops**—Today most laptops (mobile PCs) have inbuilt wireless capabilities and can connect to internet using wireless technology called Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity). While on the road, they can locate public Wi-Fi “hotspots” and easily connect to your company intranet and access important information. These Wi-Fi hotspots have a wireless base station that

“...Wainhouse Research¹ has highlighted that collaboration solutions such as audio, video, and web conferencing are reducing the need for travel eliminating airfare, taxi, and hotel expenses.”

transmits signals to Wi-Fi-enabled devices.

- **Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) and Smartphones**—A PDA is a handheld computing device with a larger screen and many more advanced applications than most cell phones, and may or may not provide phone capability. A SmartPhone is basically a cell phone and PDA combined. Smartphones have advanced capabilities and PC-like functionality such as internet access, e-mail, faxing, and remote data transfers. Smartphones often come with a preinstalled operating system, such as the Windows Mobile, RIM BlackBerry, and the iPhone.
- **Tablet PC/Pocket PC**—The Tablet PC and Pocket PC perform all of the functions of a mobile computer.

Impact of Mobility on Your Business

Mobility can help small businesses like yours work more productively and effectively by improving communication and collaboration. Having mobile and remote access to your company information can give you a competitive advantage. There are a number of business benefits your company can realize by adopting the mobile solutions

- **Maximize overall productivity**—If your mobile employees are given access to the same company information they have when they are in the office, this can significantly increase their productivity. Your employees can rely on their mobile devices to access vital information or databases while they are away, so time spent out of office or on road is not wasted, making them equally effective wherever they are located.
- **Improved customer satisfaction**—A quick response to customers' e-mails and queries is essential as it can make the difference between winning and losing a contract. This can be a difficult task when you are out of the office, but with mobile computing devices you can respond almost instantly to urgent customer requests.

- **Better communication and collaboration**—Effective communication is essential for collaboration. Through mobile computing devices your employees can send and receive emails while on the go, resulting in better collaboration.
- **Flexible work environments**—By providing your workers with mobile computing tools, you can create a more flexible environment for your employees and empower them to work from home or any other place they like.
- **Creates a paperless environment**—With continuous access to network information and resources through mobile devices, the days of travelling with a heavy load of printed documents and files are gone. However, when printed documents are required, such as printing a contract for a client on the spot, you can print on demand with portable printers.

Emerging Trend among Small Businesses

- **Mobile devices in use**—A study conducted by Nokia² has shown that mobile phones, laptops, and PDAs are the three most popular mobile devices used by employees of smaller companies in US.
- **Business functions mobile devices are being used for**—Research³ has shown that a growing number of small businesses are deploying mobile devices not only for phone and voicemail. More than 80% of small and medium businesses (SMBs) enable their employees to check email via mobile devices and 64% use mobile devices for remote computing, and more than 50% SMBs enable employees to access applications and business data via mobile devices.
- **Benefits of mobile technology to smaller companies**—More than 90% of smaller companies report that mobile technologies have provided more flexible environments to their employees by empowering them to work in the field, at home, and any

“...More than 80% of small and medium businesses (SMBs) enable their employees to check email via mobile devices and 64% use mobile devices for remote computing, and more than 50% SMBs enable employees to access applications and business data via mobile devices.”

other location. More than 60% report increased productivity and improved access to critical information as key business advantages, and more than 45% report increased customer responsiveness and faster/better decisions and collaboration as main benefits to their organizations.

² Nokia White Paper, “The State of Workforce Mobility,” 2006

³ bMighty Research Report, “Mobility in Small and Midsized Companies,” 2007

Conclusion

Today’s customers demand immediate replies to their inquiries. Since meeting this need can be a challenging task if you are away from your office, mobility is becoming imperative to gaining a real competitive advantage. Mobile solutions not only provide you with the ability to check e-mail and voice mail on the road, they also empower you to immediately access important information for the benefit of your business.

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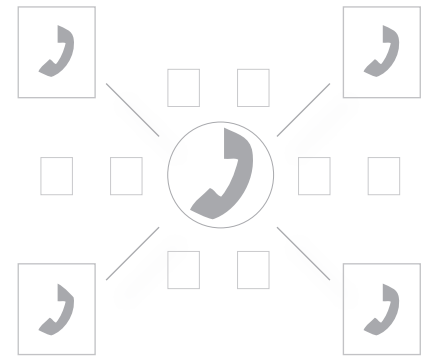
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VoIP for the Small Business

Reducing your telecommunications costs



Research firm IDC¹ has estimated that a VoIP system can reduce telephony-related expenses by 30%.

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) has become a viable solution for even the smallest of companies as broadband internet access has become affordable and much more widespread. VoIP offers a low cost alternative to expensive traditional phone services, and is rapidly becoming the communications system of choice to reduce telecommunications costs. Hosted VoIP services are also gaining popularity among smaller companies since these services do not require any investment in hardware.

Your Rising Telecommunications Costs

As a small business owner, you are under constant pressure to control your costs. You may have employees who work from home or who are mobile, such as salespeople, who make a high number of long-distance calls. As your business grows, your monthly phone bill likewise increases, so you need to look for new but effective ways to minimize your telecommunications costs.

Until recently, small businesses had no other real alternative to Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN). However, today a technology called Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) has become a viable solution for even small companies since broadband internet access has become more affordable and popular among small businesses. VoIP is a revolutionary technology that provides inexpensive voice communications and can reduce your telecommunications costs. Research firm IDC¹ has estimated that a VoIP system can reduce telephony-related expenses by 30%.

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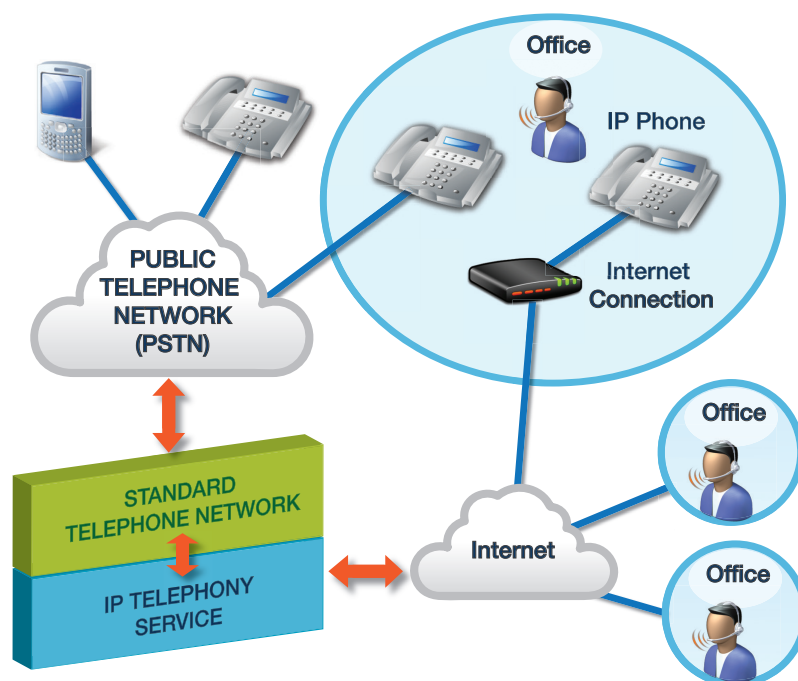
¹ IDC White Paper (2006), "VoIP: Delivering the Competitive Advantage,"

“...The good news is that there are plenty of innovative VoIP companies ready to help. They range from voice-over-broadband and SIP-trunking providers to vendors of IP PBXes that work with such SIP trunks. Though they typically aren't big-name providers with huge support organizations, the sophisticated services they offer at least aim to make the small businesses that use them seem bigger.”

Robert Poe
VoIP News

What is VoIP?

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), also called IP telephony, is the technology that allows you to make voice calls via the internet instead of traditional phone lines. You can make calls using a dial up connection or a broadband connection (however, a broadband connection is necessary for superior voice quality).



Types of VoIP Services

Free VoIP services

There are many free VoIP services that allow you to make free computer-to-computer calls. These services are mainly designed for individual use, and include such services as Yahoo Messenger, MSN Messenger, and Google Talk. They provide you with instant messaging tools and also allow simple videoconferencing.

Skype is one of the most popular VoIP service providers, and most of its services are free. Skype allows you to make free Skype-to-Skype calls, video calls, and conference calls, and also provides an instant messenger tool. These free services work well for staying in touch with family and friends, but may not provide you with the voice quality and reliability needed for your professional ongoing business needs.

Business VoIP services

These services are specifically intended for business use, offering the quality of services required by professionals, and consequently are not free. Companies offering business VoIP services include Packet8, Speak-easy, Vocalocity, Covad, and Vonage, one of the top leaders in internet telephony.

Vonage offers small business VoIP plans and charges a low, flat monthly fee for allowing you to make national and international calls. Skype also has a plan for business users which allows you to make unlimited phone calls (to a landline or cell phone) within the U.S.A and to Canada for a very low flat monthly fee. There are many such options in VoIP service providers offering a flat monthly fee from which to choose the best one to suit your requirements.

How can VoIP Save You Money?

VoIP offers many benefits and useful features over traditional telephony. The most significant benefit is that it saves your business money by reducing your phone bills, through network convergence, and by providing you with many useful features at no additional charges.

Lower costs

VoIP phone services are cheaper than traditional telephone services. If your business is making frequent long distance calls, then VoIP can dramatically reduce your phone bills as many VoIP service providers will allow you to make unlimited long distance calls at a very low flat monthly fee. For instance, if your staff is using conventional telephone services to make sales calls, your monthly telephone bill is probably hundreds of dollars per month. In contrast, if you choose to use a VoIP phone service such as Vonage for your business, you get unlimited local and long distance business calling within the United States and Canada for flat monthly fee of \$49.99 per line. International calls are charged at very nominal rate. If you are calling another Vonage number then the call is free, even if it is an international call.

“ ...VoIP phone services are cheaper than traditional telephone services. If your business is making frequent long distance calls, then VoIP can dramatically reduce your phone bills as many VoIP service providers will allow you to make unlimited long distance calls at a very low flat monthly fee. ”

No additional charges for special features

Almost all of the VoIP service providers offer many useful features free of cost, as these services are bundled with a VoIP service. For instance, with Vonage VoIP, services such as a dedicated fax line, voicemail, caller display, call diversion, call waiting, and 3-way conferencing are free.

Savings on adds, moves, and changes

As your business grows, many new employees may be added to your company, and over time some of your existing employees may leave the company. With a traditional phone system, adding a new phone line or changing an existing line is an expensive and a very time consuming job, often requiring the services of an expert who charges per service call. VoIP is very suitable for your growing business needs as adds, moves, and changes are very easy to perform yourself via a Web-based control panel.

VoIP increases your employees' productivity

VoIP provides you with several large, enterprise-level communications capabilities, such as auto-attendant (answering system) and find/follow features. Until now, these capabilities were very expensive and were only possible through Private Branch Exchange (PBX) telephony systems. However, with today's VoIP solution, your small business can have access to these advanced capabilities. For instance, your company can have access to a find/follow feature that permits rerouting of calls automatically to employees wherever they are located. With this facility your employees can choose to have calls follow them from a traditional desk phone to their cell phone or even to their e-mail boxes.

No need for separate networks

With VoIP, you do not need to maintain separate networks for voice and data. You can converge both networks into a single network, making the overall management quite simple.

Hosted VoIP vs. Premises-Based Key Benefits of Hosted VoIP

You have two options available to you: you can manage your VoIP system in-house, or you can opt for hosted VoIP services. In a premises-based model, all hardware related to the IP phone system will reside at your company's site. You will purchase, install, and maintain all the equipment, and you will need in-house expertise to operate the system. Premises-based systems are complex to install and maintain. In addition, you must invest money in equipment.

In contrast to a premises-based system, hosted VoIP solutions involve no upfront costs. All the equipment is managed off-premises by a service provider, and there is no physical hardware onsite to maintain. The service provider maintains and supports the equipment, and you get the services for a flat monthly fee.

Small companies are quickly adopting the hosted Voice over IP (VoIP) model as it is the more reliable and cost effective solution. You get services at flat monthly expenses based on the number of lines and features.

A leading consulting firm, AMI Partners2, which forecasts trends among small and medium businesses, predicted that hosted VoIP spending will grow at a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 56.9% between 2005 and 2010, and most of this growth will come from the small business segment (companies with up to 99 employees), which will grow at a spectacular 69% on a cumulative basis for the next 5 years.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Until recently, smaller companies have had no real alternative to expensive conventional phone systems. Now, as broadband internet access has become affordable even for small businesses, VoIP is becoming a cost-effective, feature-rich alternative to traditional phone systems. Small companies are quickly adopting hosted VoIP solutions to lower their telecommunication costs.

Recommendations

- ✓ Network assessment is essential to implement VoIP solutions effectively. Your network vendor can do this for you.
- ✓ Microsoft also offers VoIP products for small business, such as Office Communicator and Microsoft Response Point.
- ✓ A hosted VoIP solution is the best alternative for you if you do not want to invest in equipment and you do not have a dedicated IT staff to manage the service in-house.
- ✓ VoIP phone services are affected by power outages. Select your hosted VoIP service provider carefully. Ask them about the backup system in case of a power outage, and whether they provide emergency call service (Enhanced 911 service or E 911). Also ask vendors about the features they offer, then select the vendor who provides you with the features that best meet your requirements.
- ✓ Try to find a vendor who provides “roll to” features. In case you experience a power failure in your office, your calls will automatically be forwarded to another specified cell or landline number.
- ✓ The service provider who offers the VoIP services on a per-seat basis may prove to be more suitable as you will have predictable monthly expenses.

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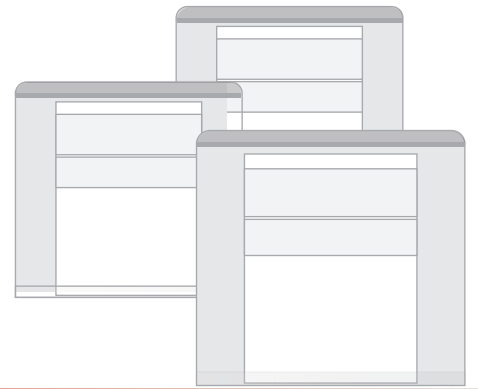
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Web Collaboration

Enhancing the productivity of your business



Small businesses that can work together effectively compete more aggressively with their competitors. Collaboration brings your employees and customers together, resulting in improved efficiency and stronger relationships with customers

In today's global business environment, the value of working together, or collaboration, can have a huge positive impact on your business. Your employees and teams need to work together, and share ideas and information across geographic boundaries. For a small business such as yours, effective collaboration is essential to improving productivity by empowering your employees to communicate and work more efficiently using the right communications tools. Small businesses that can work together effectively compete more aggressively with their competitors. Collaboration brings your employees and customers together, resulting in improved efficiency and stronger relationships with customers.

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Domitek provides affordable IT support to SMBs that want a simple approach to IT, at a fraction of the cost it takes to have an in-house IT department. Our flexible managed services plans ensure your business is always running optimally and compliantly. If you're tired of dealing with ongoing technical problems, our expert solutions can put an end to your IT worries and let you focus on your business.

For example, if ten geographically dispersed employees want to work on a project jointly; they can simply dial into an audio conferencing bridge and can share ideas and exchange information without physically moving to a common place. If the company has web conferencing or whiteboard equipment and shared workspace, all these employees can even view the same presentation or worksheet, and can modify materials together in real time. Employees no longer need to travel to the same physical location to communicate and collaborate, and can work together everywhere. They can team up with internal colleagues or external partners through these real-time collaboration tools, attaining a wide variety of common goals, such as sharing customer information, designing, product development, marketing, building consensus, and gaining approval.

2 Types of Collaboration Tools Synchronous and Asynchronous

Collaboration tools generally fall into two categories

Synchronous Tools: Synchronous tools are presence-based, used when all parties are working at the same time but in different locations. These tools enable real-time communication similar to a face-to-face meeting, connecting people at a single point of time. This type of tool includes:

- Audio conferences
- Web conferences
- Video conferences
- Instant messages
- White boards
- Application sharing

Audio conferencing, a telephone connection between more than three people through audio connection, is useful for verbal discussions and dialogue. Web conferencing is the fastest growing collaboration tool—one that you could be using today. It connects people together from multiple locations and allows application and video sharing, and can include features such as content, polling, and white boarding. Presence-based instant messaging tools are useful for quick resolution of problems and issues.

Asynchronous Tools: Asynchronous tools enable communication over a period of time, allowing people to connect at each person's own convenience, and not necessarily at the same time. Some examples include:

- Messaging (e-mail)
- Discussion boards
- Web logs (Blogs)
- Shared Calendars

“...Wainhouse Research¹ has highlighted that collaboration solutions such as audio, video, and web conferencing are reducing the need for travel eliminating airfare, taxi, and hotel expenses.”

¹ Wainhouse Research “Competitive Advantage: The CEO’s Guide to the Connected Enterprise”,

² A Frost & Sullivan White Paper, “Meetings around the World: The Impact of Collaboration on Business Performance,”

³Wainhouse Research, “Collaboration with Teams and Partners: Achieving productivity Gains Inside and Outside Your Business,”

⁴ Wainhouse Research, “The Vital Role of Web Conferencing in Small & Medium Enterprises Users Reveal Key Applications and Their Value”,

The Impact of Collaboration on Business Performance

Increased productivity and reduced costs

Collaboration tools are enhancing business performance by increasing productivity and cutting costs. Collaboration solutions replace face-to-face meetings. Wainhouse Research¹ has highlighted that collaboration solutions such as audio, video, and web conferencing are reducing the need for travel – eliminating airfare, taxi, and hotel expenses. Eliminating travel also eliminates many hours and days of downtime away from the office, and reduces stress levels and wear and tear on the business and personal lives of employees.

Improved communications and enhanced coordination

Collaboration tools help facilitate faster and more effective communications. Presence-based instant messaging tools help employees access coworkers immediately, helping them to quickly resolve customers’ problems. This increased efficiency results in higher customer satisfaction. Frost & Sullivan², together with Verizon Business and Microsoft, conducted a research program to learn how collaboration impacts business performance. The results showed that high-quality collaboration has significant and positive impact on financial performance, labor productivity, customer satisfaction, and product quality, development, and innovation.

What collaboration technologies do small businesses use?

Collaboration technologies had their beginnings in telephone and e-mail, but these days they can include everything from intranet portals to videoconferencing. Instead of using separate sets of applications, companies are creating virtual workspaces by assembling these technologies together. While the trend is shifting toward real-time collaboration, asynchronous communications tools are still playing a vital role in organizational interaction. A survey conducted by independent market research firm Wainhouse Research³ reveals that email clearly leads in daily usage, and web conferencing falls right behind audio conferencing as a daily or weekly tool. Wainhouse Research⁴

“...The results showed that high-quality collaboration has significant and positive impact on financial performance, labor productivity, customer satisfaction, and product quality, development, and innovation.”

has further shown that smaller organizations tend to be quicker in adopting new ways of working than their larger enterprise counterparts. Specifically, the survey data revealed that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have embraced the use of web conferencing to the point that it is now the medium of choice for conducting meetings, while large enterprises prefer to meet in person. About 75 percent of small enterprises reported solid to dramatic growth in using web conferencing tools. The study showed that the ability to include more people, save travel costs and time, and increase productivity are the major motivating factors for SMEs to use web conferencing.

Conclusion

As advanced collaboration tools are becoming more affordable, small businesses are embracing these tools in order to make decisions faster and provide better customer service by responding more quickly and efficiently.

Next Steps

1. Talk with your employees about how you can help them collaborate more effectively. You might be surprised by their ideas and input.
2. Work with your IT Consultant to determine which web collaboration tools will best accomplish your goals, and how to implement those tools effectively.

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Outsourced IT

How SMBs can improve IT effectiveness while lowering costs



“Business owners who outsource IT support generally enjoy stable systems, lower maintenance costs, more uptime, and less worry.”

The relationship between small and medium-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 business-building activities.

Some SMBs rely on an in-house IT staff for technical support, but this is not always all it’s cracked up to be. An in-house IT staff is generally only available for IT support during working hours – but what do you do when they’re sick, on vacation, or busy in a meeting? In-house staff also add high fixed costs to your payroll, and their experience is limited to what they have learned working for you and their last one or two employers. This gives them a very narrow perspective on overall industry trends and the “ins and outs” of available technologies. And since IT is not your core competency, you may have limited insight into how well the IT staff is performing.

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 they would not be able to afford in-house. Business owners who outsource IT support generally enjoy stable systems, lower maintenance costs, more uptime, and less worry.

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The strategic advantages of outsourcing vs. full-time staff

In a very small business, it's pretty obvious that hiring a full-time IT person, let alone a full staff, is not a viable option. But hiring full time IT resources may not be the ideal choice for larger businesses either. To illustrate this point, let's take a look at the costs and benefits of hiring one full-time IT staffer compared to contracting with an outsourced IT provider.

IT Support Option	Full time IT staff member	Outsourced IT Provider
Approximate Cost	\$5000/month Salary + benefits	\$5000/month Managed services contract
Available Resources	1 person	A team of experts with various backgrounds and experience
Scalability Options	None	Excellent
Technical Capabilities	<p>Strong:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ PC support ■ Network and server administration ■ Patches and upgrades <p>Some experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Data backup ■ Business continuity planning ■ Security protocols ■ Product selection and procurement ■ Project management ■ Licensing <p>Limited experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Infrastructure design and implementation ■ Network design and implementation ■ Telephony and VoIP ■ Industry trends and best practices ■ Strategic business use of technology 	<p>Strong:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ PC support ■ Network and server administration ■ Patches and upgrades ■ Data backup ■ Business continuity planning ■ Security protocols ■ Product selection and procurement ■ Project management ■ Licensing ■ Infrastructure design and implementation ■ Network design and implementation ■ Telephony and VoIP ■ Strategic business use of technology ■ Industry trends and best practices ■ PLUS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24/7 system monitoring and support • remote, overnight patches and upgrades

“...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.”

IT Support Option	Full time IT staff member	Outsourced IT Provider
Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">40 hours a week, usually only during normal business hours. Unavailable during sick / personal days, holidays, and vacations.Overtime is extra	<ul style="list-style-type: none">24 / 7 / 365 serviceFixed fee, no overtime

As you can see, outsourced services generally cost less than maintaining an in-house IT staff – and the technical expertise, availability, and scalability is far superior.

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 expertise and experience
- economically extending service hours
- covering staff shortages
- handling special projects
- freeing up your in-house team to focus on tasks more essential to core operations.

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 you need 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 two critical points:

1. Find out how they view technology in relation to your business.

The most common shortcoming for an outsourced IT provider is not technical expertise – it's business acumen. Ask potential providers how they will manage or recommend technology in light of your specific business goals, and what strategic approach they take to technology as a business tool. Ask for specific examples of how they have merged the two in the past. 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.

2. Explore their communication and management philosophies.

Do they have a set communication process? Are they prepared to adjust services and projects in light of feedback from your team? Will they proactively manage their relationship with you, conducting periodic reviews of your technology and recommending improvements and upgrades? Or are they going to sit back and wait for you to come to them?

A truly effective IT Company will do more than just fix what's broken. You want a service that understands your business and goals and will proactively help you reach them. Investigating these two areas carefully will help you select a provider who will be an asset to your business for many years.

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 technical expertise and 24/7 availability at approximately the same cost as (or even less than) full-time resources – without the overhead, HR paperwork, sick days, or overtime. The right provider will show you ways to use technology to lower costs and increase productivity for greater payback on your IT investments.

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