

## Cover tech basics with quick audit of four crucial areas

If you're responsible for technology at a small business, you probably find it increasingly difficult to keep up with day-to-day troubleshooting. So finding time to conduct a technology audit or to coordinate one with an outside firm may seem impossible.

It doesn't have to be. Following is a 15-minute assessment that ensures you at least have the technology basics covered. It addresses four areas that have the most impact on your productivity and profitability.

### Security comes first

The greatest threats to computers today are viruses, which are primarily spread through e-mail. If your system is infected and you aren't adequately protected, it could take hours and hundreds of dollars to repair a single PC. Imagine the cost if you have 100 computers. It's worth the investment to be protected at the three major security levels.

**Firewall.** You need a good firewall to prevent access to your network by unauthorized users. These critical hardware appliances also serve other functions such as content management of the Web. As the gateway to your network, the firewall is your first line of defense against viruses, scanning the data that flows in and out. Checking for viruses at this stage has minimal impact on your network's performance.

**Desktop scanning software.** Virus-scanning software like McAfee, Symantec or Trend Micro resides on individual computers, checking files there. But be aware that this type of protection works reactively, letting all e-mails or imported files in and then checking them. Unfortunately, by then, it may be too late if one of those e-mails or files is carrying a virus.

**Server-based virus detection software.** This type of software checks all inbound and outbound e-mail at the server level, and removes harmful content from infected or questionable e-mails and files—before they're distributed to your users. Be aware, however, that running anti-virus software on the server can cause performance issues and should be properly planned before deploying.

### Next, back it up

Consider backup and recovery as your IT insurance policies, in case you wake up one day to discover that your operating system and data are gone.

**Data.** Without data, most businesses would cease to exist, so being able to retrieve lost data is a must, whether it's lost through a disaster or an inadvertent deletion. At a minimum, data should be backed up daily, usually at night through an automated process that includes verification. Additional backups may be desired for certain applications, such as your accounting functions. Which backup software and hardware you choose depends on your company's needs.

With hard drive costs decreasing and capacity increasing, most small businesses can now afford to add a 120- to 300-gigabyte drive to their server to handle nightly backups. These servers are fast and can generally hold at least a week's worth of backups. But this server shouldn't be your only backup medium. It's critical that you still back up regularly to a removable media, such as tape or optical disk and store the backup in a secure location offsite.

You should also have a written plan that describes the process in detail so someone unfamiliar with the routine could do a recovery if needed.

**Operating system.** Your recovered data will be useless without an operating system (OS). While losing an OS is less common than losing data, it does happen. Be prepared. Remember: a full backup is always the best type of backup. A full backup is one that backs up everything including your operating system, application software and data. It offers a complete picture of your hard drive. Depending on some variables, however, a full backup every night may not be possible. If not, then try to do a full backup weekly and data backups daily.

## **Hardware counts**

Selecting the right computer hardware to use in your business can be a daunting task. Technology improvements are moving at a dizzying pace. And there are so many decisions—from which processor and how much memory to what size hard drive and what kind of display. If nothing else, consider these two factors that impact productivity the most:

**Match hardware to applications.** When buying a new computer, most now come ready to use. The operating system (usually Windows XP) is already loaded and you can start installing your application software right away. If you've purchased new software, then it should work fine. But if you try to load old software on a new computer, you'll likely experience problems. When in doubt, contact the software publisher and tell them which software you want to install, on which computer, using which operating system. They can tell you if you'll need an upgraded version of the software.

Another common problem is that anti-virus software can conflict with other applications, since it needs to run continuously in the computer memory's background. If you think you have a compatibility problem, try shutting down the anti-virus program and then run the application. If everything works fine, then anti-virus compatibility is the problem. You can check with the anti-virus technical support staff to see if they've developed a fix. If not, you may need to try a different anti-virus program.

**Streamline computer set-up.** If you're manually setting up each new computer, it can take the good part of a day to transfer all the applications and data from the old computer to the new one. Applications generally need to be re-installed so that information is entered properly into the Windows registry (as well as other mysterious areas of Windows). Instead, invest in time-saving tools that do the transfer work for you such as

Novell's Zenworks or Alohabob's PC Relocator. If you prefer not to do it yourself, outside firms can handle the deployment for a fee.

## **On to the Internet**

**Domain name.** Even if you don't have a Web site, you want a domain name for two reasons: to give yourself the option of a Web site in the future and to make your e-mail address credible. Your e-mail address is a key promotional tool. Why use johndoe@yahoo.com or johndoe@msn.com when you could be using johndoe@yourcompanyname.com? Think of a domain name as your online identity. With the annual cost at \$35 or less, it's a valuable marketing investment. Check with your Internet provider to register your domain name and set up custom e-mail addresses.

**Web site.** Many small businesses shun a Web site if they aren't doing e-commerce. If you're one of them, you may be overlooking a way to reduce administrative costs. An informational site can help deflect common phone inquiries, freeing up your customer service staff to focus on top customers and sales.

Studies show that billions of dollars in offline spending are now influenced by online information, and the numbers will continue to increase as Internet penetration increases. In addition, most Web hosting companies provide you with usage reports that identify the number of site visitors, which pages are visited most, etc., so you can make strategic changes to your site.