




Dallas Small Business Owner's Guide to IT

———— A Willow Bend eBook ————





As a small business CEO, it's quite likely that you aren't fluent in information technology (IT), because your main focus is on running and growing your business. Even so, you understand that technology drives your business forward, so you need to have a working knowledge of how IT drives business processes.

Budgets are perpetually tight, so you must be sure that IT investments provide immediate returns in making business processes more efficient while broadening the possibilities for the business moving forward. Consequently, IT solutions can either be managed by internal non-technical staff, or they are more advanced and require support and administration from outsourced technical support specialists.

Knowing which category existing and future IT solutions fit into is a cornerstone of an IT strategy that will guide the business now and in the future. This small-business owner's guide to IT is intended to help you determine the right approach to managing the IT solutions that drive your business forward today and tomorrow.





Developing Your Small-Business IT Toolbox

Your business IT toolbox is not unlike a mechanic's toolbox in that the tools either build something or fix something. In the case of your business, the IT tools make business processes possible, or they make them better. Of course, like any toolbox, you need to have a strategic plan to ensure you have the right tools for the job. That means setting a general strategic direction for your IT based on your business processes.

That strategy is a short plan that provides the basics of why you need IT, what it's for, and how it will be used to support your business. This will help you determine needed technology types and their compatibility with other forms of technology as well as what you might need in the future.

Regardless of what type of business you own, there are essential technologies that your business cannot do without, which include:

-  Computers and network technology
-  Software
-  Data storage
-  Communication and collaboration
-  Security

You want all of these IT solutions to be compatible in order to enable streamlined business processes. Business processes generally come down to five areas:

- 1** Sales and marketing
- 2** Supply chain
- 3** Accounting and billing
- 4** Communication
- 5** Data management

All of your essential technologies will need to work as part of almost every business process that is outlined above. Let's take a closer look at each one in order to see what it generally does and how it interacts across business processes:

Computers and networking

Depending on the number of employees you have, you will need either a desktop computer or a laptop computer for each one. These computers must be capable of accessing the same storage so that if one computer goes down, all of the business data are still available. This is where the network comes in.

The ideal scenario for any small business with several computers and users would be a client-server network. In a client-server network, all computers are connected to the server or centralized computer. The server is used to manage the entire network and stores shared information in a central location.

The clients in the network can be individual computers as well as printing and scanning devices. The server software performs specific tasks such as file sharing, printer sharing, connecting multiple users to the Internet, or sending and receiving email for each of the network's clients.

While these networks can be physically connected, they are best set up wirelessly via either a local area network (LAN) or a wide area network (WAN). A WAN is needed if your network devices are in distributed locations, such as in different offices. For most small businesses that operate in a central office, a LAN may work just fine.

The server acts as a single centralized unit for the whole of the network, so the Internet connection can be easily monitored and controlled. Another advantage is that performance of computers improves, because the server stores the data for other computers. This allows the client computers to run faster.

“These computers must be capable of accessing the same storage so that if one computer goes down, all of the business data are still available.”

A network enables:



Information
exchange
and sharing



Employee
communication
tools



Collaboration
features



Printer/fax
sharing



Data protection



Shared Internet
access



In-house
email systems

Software

Today, everything from the computer's operating system and the productivity solutions to the security and many of the communications solutions that businesses use are software-related. These can bring their own expense and challenges, ranging from installation and licensing costs to updates and security.

For many small businesses, utilizing software that is delivered via the Internet—known as software as a service (SaaS)—can eliminate many of the challenges of having physical software that is installed on individual computers or on a server. Today, SaaS or other on-demand applications can deliver everything that small businesses need, such as:



Office productivity software such as Microsoft Office 365, with tools such as Word, Excel, and PowerPoint



Customer relationship management (CRM)



Finance and accounting software



Communication and Collaboration

Communication in the digital age, even for small businesses, can be facilitated by the same tools as those used by the largest enterprises. Every business relies on mobile-device communication via smartphones, laptops, and tablets. In addition, employees can utilize collaborative communication tools like chat applications and other collaboration software in order to help them work together by communicating and sharing information.

These tools facilitate electronic communications that enable the workforce to easily send messages, files, data, documents, and other forms of communication. Today, many of these functions are available as part of a unified productivity software suite such as Office 365, which can facilitate videoconferencing as well as business productivity software access.

Phone systems and devices for small businesses can be facilitated by forgoing the landline phone system and going straight to a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) system. VoIP enables all of the functions of a traditional phone system while enabling the employees to access and use such a phone system remotely via their own smartphones or other mobile devices.



Understanding IT Risks and Vulnerabilities

All devices in a small-business network (printers, scanners, wireless access points, point-of-sale systems, storage devices, and smartphones) are IT solutions that open vulnerabilities to the network. Each of these devices requires security measures in order to ensure that the network and data are protected from intrusion.

Consequently, your business must know the exact location on your network of sensitive business information in order to protect it adequately. In addition, the human element is always the weakest link in the security chain, so it pays to have clear employee protocols for access and sharing.

Anti-virus software and firewalls are a must for every business's network; they can detect, block, and, in some cases, disarm or remove common malicious software programs. It can be a challenge to ensure that every computer on your network has up-to-date anti-virus software installed and running.

Another potential security vulnerability is data that can be stored on mobile devices that can be lost or stolen. Part of a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policy is having software installed that can track and remotely wipe data on a stolen device. In addition, encryption software can be used to ensure that the data cannot be breached. A written security policy sets the stage for ensuring that all on-site and off-site users understand the required protocols.

It is common for small businesses to lack a reliable business continuity and disaster recovery plan in the event of data loss due to a manmade or natural disaster. Your small business will need to have access to all of your critical data, so setting up on site and having two off-site backup locations for data are imperative. Those data will need to be updated continually in order to ensure that the business can continue to operate in the event of a disaster that prevents normal access.



Managing IT Solutions Internally

As a business owner, your job is to provide the tools that enable your employees to do their jobs efficiently and without complications. IT solutions are the tools that make that possible, and, as such, they should not only work intuitively but also work as flawlessly as possible without interruption or downtime.

When we talk about managing IT solutions internally, what do we mean? Essentially, it means any IT solutions that do not require the intervention of an IT specialist in order to keep them operating. Your experience likely informs you that the list of IT solutions that meet that criterion is fairly small.

“ Most small businesses rely on the ability to communicate and do business remotely, which requires the use of smartphones, tablets, laptops, and other mobile devices. ”

Handling your business's IT data comes down to either handing them off to an internal tech-savvy employee or outsourcing them to an IT support provider. For many small businesses, the answer is a combination of both methods, depending on the IT solution and how it impacts the business.

Most small businesses rely on the ability to communicate and do business remotely, which requires the use of smartphones, tablets, laptops, and other mobile devices. While your business can manage the use and security of mobile devices used for business via a strong BYOD policy and software, it can be best implemented with support from an outsourced managed services provider (MSP).

Social media and the business website are now crucial communication channels for a small business. Once again, after ensuring that the website is designed and optimized for users who will view it on a variety of devices, as well as set up for ecommerce if it applies, it can be administered and run internally by the business. The same applies to social media where the business may interact with customers and suppliers via Facebook, Twitter, and other sources.



IT Risks and Vulnerabilities

The absence of proper understanding of the risks and vulnerabilities that can be inherent to almost every IT solution is one of the biggest challenges for small businesses. Yet, even with some of the structural limitations present in many small businesses, you can manage those risks and vulnerabilities more effectively by adjusting how internal controls are applied.

One of the first steps to improving internal control in your small business is to ensure that each member of the staff can only access the applications and data for which he or she has authorization. Computers, mobile devices, software, and the network require encryption, password protection, and/or firewalls in order to ensure that data are kept safe.

Multi-factor authentication provides greater access security for authorized users.

This can be used to limit access to the network as well as high-priority software such as accounting and CRM. Most important, it can be configured to allow each user access to only the specific areas that his or her job description requires.

One of the biggest challenges that you face as a business owner when it comes to IT is determining when you can handle a function in house and when it requires outsourced IT support. Because these risks and vulnerabilities are an ever-present danger regardless of the size of the business, having skilled support to handle these and other IT solutions is the best approach to ensuring that you can concentrate on running the business rather than IT.





When Do IT Solutions and Systems Need Outsourced Support?

For you as a business owner as well as for your employees, IT is a tool that should enable smoother business processes, collaboration, and communication. As such, it needs to work transparently and without fail.

Because of the nature of technology in almost every instance, it requires regular maintenance, monitoring, and updates in order to ensure that reliability and transparency.

For the most part, maintaining software, hardware, networks, and telephony in order to ensure maximum stability and security requires technical expertise oversight. Problems begin with software that's not maintained, as the majority of malware is able to enter computers because they run out-of-date software.

While software publishers release updates that include fixes for security problems, making sure those updates happen as scheduled and without interrupting business processes requires some oversight. Managing and monitoring your IT infrastructure and setting up your cloud services are major projects that are best left to IT professionals. This will ensure that they are administered and protected, which frees your staff from downtime and worrying about access or security risks.

When it comes to monitoring network activity and identifying threats on a day-to-day basis, small-business owners often lack the time, know-how, and internal resources they need in order to get the job done. An MSP can help decide what tools a small business needs and can conduct a security audit to take a comprehensive look at all entry points and identify any vulnerable areas that the company should address.

“Because of the nature of technology in almost every instance, it requires regular maintenance, monitoring, and updates in order to ensure that reliability and transparency.”

In addition, an MSP can coordinate and facilitate backup and disaster recovery plans and protocols in order to ensure that the business can operate under all circumstances and that data are safe. Equally important to ensuring data safety is an MSP's ability to help your business meet all applicable regulatory compliance requirements and provide valuable insight into your risks and requirements (HIPAA, PCI, SOX, etc.).

Another important aspect is ensuring that the IT infrastructure for the business overall is optimally maintained, managed, and secure. The challenge in accomplishing this is the endless hardware choices and the always present tight budget. This makes it difficult to find the right solutions at the right price and at the right time so that the business processes are able to function properly without affecting day-to-day business operations.

An MSP is in the best position with the right tools and personnel to implement, monitor, and maintain:

- ✓ Content and information management
- ✓ IT infrastructure optimization
- ✓ Business continuity and disaster recovery
- ✓ Cloud services
- ✓ Desktop support
- ✓ Data management

While *cloud services* offer many benefits to your small business, support is required in order to manage those services so that implementation and any changes can be managed. If chosen and implemented correctly, they enable your company to cut costs by not having to buy IT infrastructure up front while simultaneously taking the burden off of internal staff and IT. By helping your business leverage the inherent security of the cloud, MSPs can enable easy scaling-up of services as the business grows.



This would include:



Productivity SaaS solutions such as Office 365 and videoconferencing



Desktop as a service (DaaS) to eliminate operating-system updates and desktop troubleshooting as well as increasing desktop lifecycle in order to lower costs



VoIP enables your business to have a full-service phone system that is delivered via a private Internet protocol connection, which delivers features, flexibility, mobility, and quality similar to those of a larger enterprise

Outsourcing IT functions or utilizing cloud services does not transfer your responsibility for protecting critical business or client data. This requires that an MSP support your business in performing due diligence when engaging vendors and validating controls annually.

High-speed Internet support from an MSP ensures that your business is making the most of your connectivity as well as bandwidth allocation necessary for simultaneous VoIP, teleconferencing, and data transfers. The experience of MSPs puts them in the best position to help your business investigate and invest in the appropriate access technology, including options for redundancy.

Managed business continuity services are all about backing up critical business data, which is crucial for loss of power or other disaster. By partnering with an IT provider, your business can ensure that data are securely backed up on site as well as in two off-site locations. This keeps data secure regardless of unexpected downtime that could otherwise bring the business to a halt.

Remote network monitoring by IT experts via software ensures that the network connectivity and functions can be managed in a proactive rather than reactive manner. This means that with IT experts monitoring all activity of the network, they can spot potential problems before they affect business processes and remedy them without impacting the workforce.



Conclusion

As a business owner, you grasp how IT becomes an increasingly important part of your company's stability and growth. This small-business guide is the first step to shaping the way that you can not only think about IT management but also facilitate strategic decisions. While this guide to IT will answer many questions, the following list of Willow Bend blog posts will provide even greater clarity on a variety of the subjects covered:

- ✓ Mobility configuration and workforce mobility trends
- ✓ Managed IT services guide and when to upgrade IT support
- ✓ VoIP benefits
- ✓ Understanding the cloud and its benefits
- ✓ Security and data protection

By providing the support that your small business needs in order to make IT a reliable and transparent tool that furthers the business, you can devote your full attention to running and growing the business today and tomorrow.

About Willow Bend Systems

Willow Bend Systems leverages your existing technology to develop IT solutions that work for your business. With managed IT services, infrastructure hosting, IT hardware sales, and IP phone systems, Willow Bend Systems delivers comprehensive, streamlined IT solutions that help you focus on your clients, not your technology.



For more information, visit www.willowbendsystems.com