

Tips for cutting small business IT costs



John Deans

Things are much better in the business world around Washington County than they were this time last year. With such a diversity of industries across my client base I am seeing and hearing more positive financial comments over the past several months.

That said, most are quite negative on the economic outlook next year and beyond due to the expected expiration of the Bush tax cuts, onerous burdens of the health control bill kicking in, and the unemployment rate still way too high. Most companies are planning for a difficult 2011 if the current administration keeps implementing their socialist and anti-capitalist policies.

Cost control and cutting will be the number one focus for most companies just to maintain their bottom line. Management of Information Technology expenses are at the top of that list to keep balance sheets in the black. With 10 years under my belt as a local independent consultant who's been in the IT field for nearly three decades, I have some tips for cutting small business IT costs.

The first thing small companies need to do is make their computer equipment last longer. The goal is to keep those servers, workstations and laptops currently in operation remain in service for as many years as

possible. Writing off the depreciation is one thing, but delaying capital purchases on computers as long as possible really saves money.

One of my clients in Chappell Hill has had their same eight Dell computers in operation since 2001. Next

year I will be lobbying them for new desktops since they will have gotten a full decade of use from that first purchase. Now that's cutting IT costs when you get 10 years of service from a computer!

We got that long of a service life by performing simple, easy and inexpensive maintenance procedures. First we ran them on clean power from UPS battery backups which made it easier on the sensitive electronic components. Next we routinely opened up the boxes and blew out the dust and dirt build up out of the heat sinks and fans with dry air from high pressure air compressors.

When the software was upgraded we added RAM and made sure the desktops had the maximum amount of memory installed that the computer was able to handle. Over the years we had to replace a couple of hard drives so we took that opportunity to increase the disk space during the swap out.

When the price of LCD monitors dropped over the decade we replaced the older and bulkier original CRT monitors

with LCD screens that saved desk space, power, and people's eyeballs. Over the years those original CRT viewed desktops started out as Windows 2000 with only 256 MB of RAM on 80GB hard drives ended up with LCD equipped Windows XP running on 1 GB of RAM with 250 GB drives.

Those small incremental upgrades keep the applications running, the workers happier, and the IT costs down. Gone are the days I saw back in the 1990s when companies swapped out desktops and laptops every other year because the money was there and they just had to use it.

Increasing productivity from workers has always been a goal of small companies. Making it easier and more convenient for employees to do their job is one good way of doing just that.

Remote access has become a great tool for workers to access their corporate workstations from their home computers to do some after-hours digital labor.

Whether companies use Windows Remote Desktop, GoToMyPC.com or the free LogMeIn.com like I do, employees can get work done from home either in the evenings and weekends or while they are stuck at home with a sick kid.

Any of these services enable workers to remotely control their computer at work where their company files and applications reside. This capability makes it just like they are sitting at their office desk working on their

company computer. Remote access to company computers is easy to configure at little to no cost to the corporation and will increase productivity.

Finally, companies need to watch their IT costs by not over paying for IT guys like me. I'm worth it of course, but my goal is to eliminate my job at your company. I have done this for years now by training the most likely IT-to-be employee at a company how to take over the daily IT activities thereby decreasing my role over time.

What you want to avoid if possible is a dedicated IT person just to maintain computers and software as pure overhead to your corporate budget. This can be done with companies with less than 50 employees. Companies with 100 computers or more still need a fulltime IT nerd on the payroll.

Smaller mom and pop firms can utilize part time computer consultants to help them set up their computing infrastructure then slowly pick up the skills to manage it themselves. As they get more comfortable performing IT tasks internally they will call on their external consultants less as the months and years go by.

This is how I have accumulated over 125 clients in the Washington County area, but I only have to visit those earlier ones just a couple of times per year or when something difficult arises. I still get occasional calls from my first client I got back in 2000, but he handles 95 percent

of the IT tasks I handed over to him.

When companies cross-train their employees to handle IT responsibilities along with the core business duties, companies can save money by decreasing their dependency on expensive yahoos like me. Employees that take on those IT tasks also increase their skill sets thereby becoming more valuable to the company.

That way when times get tough again those hard working human assets will keep their jobs after numerous rounds of layoffs.

Bottom line: For real Americans that believe in our free enterprise capitalistic system and are working hard to preserve it, look at better managing your IT costs to keep your company in the black and help the USA get back on track!

Next week's column: Going manual with your digital SLR camera.

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