



Effective, Innovative Small Business Technology Solutions

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Provided is an overview for small businesses that will help serve as a guide for effective and innovative use of technology in the workplace. This overview follows the Business Technology Checklist that has been developed by technology professionals as part of the West Virginia Small Business Technology Education & Competitiveness Initiative. That checklist can be found at: <http://www.wvconnectivity.net/go/WVSBT%20PDF/Business%20Tech%20Checklist.pdf>

These applications and technologies are offered as suggested ones that a small business may want to consider. Please use the services of a technology professional or service firm to help analyze and develop appropriate recommendations for your business. A database of technology companies and service firms in West Virginia can be found by searching this on-line listing: <http://wvconnectivity.poclink.com/Index.asp>

Additional background on small business technologies can be found at: http://www.wvconnectivity.net/Business_Connectivity/Technology_Your_Business.htm

Effective, Innovative Small Business Technology Solutions

1. Productivity Enhancement Applications/Accounting Package

If you are one of the millions of small businesses that are NOT using accounting software to manage your business check out w/Ease or Intuit's [Quickbooks](#) Simple Start. Lounge Pants Software www.w-ease.com, based in Wichita, Kansas brings us w/Ease Small Business Software, which is made for small businesses with five or less employees. At \$89, w/Ease Software helps with Estimating, Job Tracking, Customer Information, Labor, Inventory, Invoicing, Accounts Receivable, Tax Reporting.

As founder and president of, Lounge Pants Software, makers of [w/Ease](#), John Dettenwanger, watched the small business owners he hired scribble notes on legal pads, gum wrappers and the backs of their hands then handwrite awkward invoices, he realized these entrepreneurs needed an easy tool to keep them organized. Lounge Pants' founding premise is based on this observation and extensive interviewing of small business owners and small business development professionals. That premise is that a small business that establishes sound business management practices has a greater chance of success.

I can't tell you how this software works compared to Peachtree, Quickbooks or some other business management tool but I can tell you that the w/Ease's designers worked with over 50 small business owners and the Wichita Independent Business Association (WIBA) in developing their product.

I even know a local accounting firm (Simpson&Osborne) that hosts Quickbooks for you, sets it up and sends you the reports.

Do not NOT do this

Both websites have online demos of the products and tutorials.

2. Customer Database

Make and manage contact with your prospects and clients. How you do that can be as varied as the technologies available to you..but an ingredient in that recipe is the list, database of people that you care about or you want to care about.

The number one fan favorite is ACT!2005. Heard of Goldmine? My favorite is Prophet because it is built into Outlook (face it most people use Outlook). Compare all three at www.avidian.com

As you move up the foodchain, check out Salesnet, software as a service solution to managing and making contact for mid-market customers. www.salesnet.net

3. Data Backup System/Procedures

Backups - Do it; Do it more than once....either with a system in your computer/office or through an off-site hosted backup system.

www.maxtor.com Their OneTouch II offers massive storage capacity combined with excellent backup software (Dantz Retrospect Express HD) that lets you schedule automatic data backups (normally a frustrating, time-consuming task) easily in a matter of mouse clicks. Of course, some small business owners prefer to keep their data backups off site. Now, you can unplug the OneTouch and take it home with you, but that's a bit awkward on a daily basis.

Does free backup sound good? Then mosey on down to mozy.com. Mozy provides two gigabytes of backup capacity and the software is a piece of cake to install and configure, plus it contains no adware or spyware. Even better: the data is also encrypted.

While you get 2GB for free, Mozy charges a fee for more capacity. 5GB costs \$19 per year, \$29.95 for 10GB and \$39.95 for 20GB a year. That's really cheap compared to other options. The downside? Part of the deal includes a sponsored weekly newsletter, as well as a limited amount of advertising.

Of course, there are many other inexpensive options available. A UK firm named [Mamut](http://www.mamut.com) www.mamut.com has introduced an online backup service aimed at smaller businesses. It offers the first 500MB of data backup free of charge indefinitely. Additional space costs 0.79 British pounds (about \$1.43) per month for 1GB. Mamut Online Backup is an encrypted service that updates continuously while your computer's connected to the Internet. It runs automatically in the background and creates a backup copies whenever a file is updated or changed. Customers have their own encryption key, which only they can access.

Another useful possibility is [Xdrive](http://www.xdrive.com) www.xdrive.com of Santa Monica, Calif., an AOL subsidiary. Xdrive offers free storage that is really only a 15-day trial. After that, though, it's still pretty cheap — it costs 5GB for \$10 per month or 10 GB for \$20.

SimpleTech's SimpleShareNAS www.simpletech.com offers a twist to network-attached storage that we will talk about later. NAS can make it easier to set up and manage backups..because all the storage is on a device, not individuals drives

This is worth exploring with that trusted advisor we will talk about. If you have a computer, it runs your business, you will need a backup, not if, but when. For the cost of a couple of business lunches, the monthly fee for online backup should be on your menu.

4. Business Email Account

Set up a business email account that, preferably, ties in with your company's name or company's web domain name. This way you will have greater recognition and credibility by receivers.

Also, learn effective use of email systems, such as Microsoft Outlook. [Total Workday Control Using Microsoft Outlook](#): this is the first book I've read that really blends the technical aspects of using Microsoft Outlook with deep insight on MANAGING your day to day activities.

Author Michael Linenberger walks the reader through not just typing in dates, tasks and emails into Outlook but in HOW to do these things so that your day is MOST productive.

He books is focused on 8 best practices for using Microsoft Outlook more effectively:

1. Tracking all tasks in Outlook's task system - no sticking notes, no email reminders, just Outlook tasks
2. Distinguishing between Master and Daily tasks
3. Simple system of prioritization
4. Writing only next actions on your daily todo list
5. Daily and weekly planning
6. Converting emails to tasks
7. Filing emails using categories
8. Delegating Tasks effectively

Although you might not be able to take your entire management system and convert it to how [Total Workday Control Using Microsoft Outlook](#) suggests, if you just take a few ideas from this book and apply it to your day-to-day life you'll be much more productive.\

Small businesses looking for a full-featured collaboration system should consider the Joyent Accelerator, a product that keeps things simple, while delivering big on features, ease, and convenience.

Accelerator, the first product from one-year-old [Joyent, Inc, www.joyent.com](#) is an installed hardware and software combination that delivers e-mail, calendar, contact and file storage applications to anyone on your team through a convenient browser interface. For businesses that prefer a hosted solution, the company now offers the Joyent Connector.

Because Joyent works through a browser, there's no software to install on your employees' systems, and users can log in from any location, even out of the office. It uses [AJAX](#) to deliver a rich-client experience, so this browser app feels as robust as any installed software.

The interface is easy enough for even the least technical people in your organization. The five main areas are listed across the top: Binder (a project management tool), E-mail, Calendar, People and File. Click on one and you'll see that tool's options along the left-hand side, while the content fills the center of the screen.

Each tool includes collaboration features that make it more than a basic program, while still keeping usability easy. The Calendar app lets you see other people's programs along with yours, so that you can find open times for meetings. You can then schedule a meeting for other people; they'll be notified of the request and you'll get a notification back when they accept the calendar addition. You can also subscribe to [RSS](#) or [ICS](#) feeds, so that you can view calendar information for people outside the company.

The People tool lets you create entries for people or groups, and make them private or public. You can create smart groups so that new people are automatically added to your list when they meet certain criteria, such as being a member of the sales team.

The Files section, likewise, lets you create self-updating smart folders, which add new content.

If you're the type of person who wants to be able to choose an E-mail package that's not Microsoft, take heart. There are a number of other options out there.

www.informationweek.com/shared/printableArticle.jhtml?articleID=187202319

Another favorite www.webmail.us

I use email as my activity reporting tool, contact tool, business idea tool..soon to move to RSS..I don't know how you collaborate, communicate, e-mail , blogs, social networks, podcasts..no argument from me..communicate electronically but not for the sake of communicating electronically. if I know your email address, I can introduce myself to you professionally and easily. The rest is up to you, your product/service.

5. Web Site

There's three ways to build a web site. Two of the ways including building it yourself. You can hire a consultant who can build the web site for you. You can buy software, install it on your computer and build the web site yourself (also get a hosting service and domain name) OR you can use a "DIY" - do it yourself service.

Many web hosts such as GoDaddy.com, Hypermart www.hypermart.com and Verio www.verio.com give you an online template based web building tool. A newer service you might want to consider is from Edit.com. www.edit.com

Small Business Computing [writes](#), "To update their sites, customers sign in at Edit.com and then browse their site and type updates directly into their Web pages -- all from within their Web browser. Edit.com works with any existing Web site and lets owners like Barnes quickly and easily change text, links, images, PayPal features and even add new pages or attach .PDF files."

The service doesn't require any software or Web design configuration know-how as it automatically customizes to the site's styles, fonts and layout. It then shows the changes exactly as they will display live on the Internet.

Other things to do on your web site:

FolderShare™, a leading service in the emerging space of file synchronization and remote access technology that helps customers access information across multiple devices. FolderShare service saves customers the hassle of sending large files via e-mail, burning them to CDs or DVDs and mailing them, or uploading them to a Web site. Instead, it allows customers to sync important information, making it well suited for personal or small-business use. The FolderShare service also enables private, remote access to customers' own files from any Web browser.

www.foldershare.com

37Signals writes code for the Fortune "5 million."

"Our products do less than the competition – intentionally.

www.37signals.com

6. Technology Planning

Cnet.com has launched a new web site, [Best Practices: Tips for Your Small Business](#). The site's description reads - If you're in business, you're looking for solutions. What you do with your systems, software, and services is as important as what you buy. Knowing how to get started, where to turn, and what questions to ask helps you streamline your efforts and make more money.

http://www.cnet.com/4520-10192_1-6376230.html?tag=nl.e501

CMP media joins the family of small business focused web sites and has launched Smallbizresource.com.

My favorite is www.smallbusinesscomputing.com. It is simple for me to get their daily email, read their reviews

7. Broadband Applications - Web Conferencing/Meetings

[Convoq](#) ASAP Express, a free Web conferencing service. This is a bit of a good news, bad news story. The bad news is that the Web meeting is limited to one-to-one virtual encounters. The good news is that this isn't a gimmick. According to Kim Shah, vice president of marketing at Convoq, ASAP Express isn't a limited-time offer. www.convoq.com

ASAP Express will allow you to conduct unlimited free one-to-one Web meetings featuring VoIP, video, text chat, screen sharing, PowerPoint and file transfers.

A company called Digiticians www.digiticians.com offers desktop support over the phone and through their Web site. The price is great, you can purchase help in 15-minute blocks, but it only works if you have an operational Internet connection. .

8. Security

Software developed by [Essential Software](#) (ESS) www.essentialsecurity.com is designed to protect e-mail and to prevent anyone from forwarding, copying, or printing the e-mail that you send. ESS recently announced the newest edition of Essential Taceo (version 1.6), which now includes Remote Laptop Security, a feature designed to prevent unauthorized access to e-mail and documents on a notebook. According to Ray Zambrowski, president and CEO of ESS, savvy small businesses typically protect data inside the firewall from threats such as viruses, spam and phishing. But mobile devices — especially notebooks — that carry data outside the protection of the company firewall remain a weak link. "When a company laptop is stolen, your business is exposed," said Zambrowski. "You can lose all kinds of sensitive data — customer info: network passwords, intellectual property. That kind of loss can put you out of business."

[Encryption](#) plays a major role in Taceo's remote laptop security feature. ESS designed the software to store any files — e-mail, spreadsheets, Word docs, images — you want secured in a 1028-bit [RAS](#) encrypted, password-protected folder on the notebook's hard drive. "Small businesses haven't been able to take advantage of encryption technologies because of the complexity and the price," said Zambrowski. "Until now, that capability has been limited to big corporations."

Beyond the encrypted folder, the software offers a second line of defense. In the event that your notebook is stolen or lost — or if you believe that someone has stolen your password, you can go to the ESS Web site, log on to your account and deactivate that notebook. Zambrowski says deactivating renders the password useless and disables access to the information on that computer.

ESS sells Essential Taceo on an annual subscription basis for \$59.95 per person or computer. You can download the software at the ESS site and use it for free for 30 days

D-Link SecureSpot Internet Security Device

[D-Link](#) designed the SecureSpot as a desktop Internet Security Device to protect networked PCs in home offices and small businesses against viruses, spam, spyware, pop-ups and hackers. You administer the device through a browser-based control panel. Price: \$100.

www.dlink.com

9. e-Commerce/e-Procurement/On-line Order Taking

Interland's s Platinum Business Solutions service for \$95 per month. Interland's service includes a 10-page Web site, consultation with a designer, e-mail marketing, keyword advertising, blogs, online gift certificates, analytics, e-commerce capabilities, a new domain name for two years and e-mail with up to 50 mailboxes and hosting services. www.interland.com

Affinity Internet's \$49.95 per month ReadyWeb package and a new marketing service called "ValueTraffic," which takes the load of online marketing off the shoulders of small business owners. www.affinity.com

GoDaddy and its [Quick Shopping Cart](#) solution. www.godaddy.com has gained popularity in the e-commerce world due in part to its low pricing plans – which range from \$9.95 to \$49.95 per month

[Miva, Inc.](#), makers of the popular [Miva Merchant 5](#) e-commerce platform, recently announced that its Small Business Division has launched Miva Merchant Fast Track. The new platform is specifically designed for smaller, Web-based businesses.

"We've spent a lot of time in the e-commerce arena, we talked to a lot of customers and got a feel of what they were looking for. We found that one of the major focuses is the need for simplicity in the management and creation of a store. But many features in Miva Merchant 5 are never used or are too complicated for some people. Fast Track is a streamlined version, with a simple interface to get online," said James Harrell, vice president and general manager of Miva Small Business Division. Harrell said Fast Track still has same modular architecture as Merchant 5, so third party developers can still add functionality. Merchants are limited to selling 100 products in five categories with this platform. There is currently no upgrade path for merchants that surpass the 100 product limit, he said, but the company is working on such a solution.

"Miva Merchant 5 is our primary product, with 110,000 installations. But the focus of our small- to medium-sized business development is to provide a full suite for SMBs to monetize their Web businesses," he added.

"Miva Merchant Fast Track lowers the barrier to entry for small businesses that want to start selling online, delivering a solution that gives them an immediate Web presence and a potentially long-term revenue stream," he said in a released statement. "Miva lets the growing pool of small businesses worldwide launch an online presence and deliver products and services to its customers in an easy and efficient manner."

According to Miva, Fast Track is built for customers that need a simple and powerfully designed solution without broader comprehensive features or the increased data limit like Miva Merchant 5.

The new software package offers an intuitive interface with five steps to get a new online storefront up and running:

Build the Store: Design the foundation of the online store – customize fonts, colors, layout and key settings

Stock the Store: Manage a product catalog with detailed descriptions and product images; control product inventory

Set up Business: Determine payment methods and specify shipping options

Run the Store: Track best sellers, revenues, orders and storefront traffic; manage orders, process payments and handle customer accounts

Market the Store: Advertise with popular integrated services such as search and e-mail marketing and leverage Pay-Per-Click advertising through Miva Media's Ad Center

Harrell says that Fast Track is available for \$595 from [Miva Central](#). www.mivacentral.com

Harrell also says he considers eBay's ProStores www.prostores.com and MonsterCommerce www.monstercommerce.com as MIVA's primary competition in the SMB e-commerce market, as they both offer similarly tiered Web commerce services.

To see a demonstration of Miva Merchant Fast Track, or to view the entire line of Miva Small Business e-commerce solutions, visit <http://smallbusiness.miva.com>.

Don't play games here..this is where you want the best you can offer. Check out www.ecommerce-guide.com

10. Document Scanning/Imaging/Electronic Storage

Office space is at a premium in just about any small business, and it's getting harder to justify the file cabinet space when a decent scanner can digitize all those documents for you. Extra floor space isn't the only benefit, either. You'll be better able to track and organize documents, maintain audit trails and other compliance mandates, and save money on your fax bills.

Fujitsu today announced a scanner it believes can help small businesses get a handle on document management — the ScanSnap S500. scansnap.fujitsu.com The newest of Fujitsu's ScanSnap scanners, the S500 is about the size of a shoe box, includes a 50-document feeder and scans at up to 18 pages per minute — a 20 percent performance improvement over previous models, according to the company.

Several S500 features that he says makes scanning a simple, sensible option for small businesses. "The scanner has a dual-camera system with a camera situated in the front and in the back of the unit," he said. "That means you can scan a double-sided document in a single pass." Fujitsu says the S500 is the only high-speed, double-sided scanner that sells for less than \$500.

Designed to speed the scanning process, the S500 can accept a batch of documents and automatically discern differences in the individual pages. "The scanner analyzes each document in a batch and treats them differently," said Francis. "For example, you can have any combination of color, black-and-white, double-sided, letter-size, legal size and upside down documents, and the S500 can detect the differences and adjust the scan settings and page orientation automatically."

The scanner also lets you create 10 profiles that combine both target applications and scanner settings. Francis said this lets you scan to various applications at the appropriate settings by pressing one button. "You can set up the profiles to scan documents to the applications your use most, such as scan to e-mail, scan to hard drive, scan to Adobe — without having to configure the settings every time you scan."

Why Scan Documents?

- Better image quality — faxing degrades image quality
- Color scanning
- Eliminate long distance fax (phone) charges
- Better audit trail
- Replacement for overnight shipping
- Electronic filing
- Forms processing
- Digitize business cards
- Reduce paper storage

While scanners have been around for years, Francis says that small businesses haven't taken to digitizing documents in large number due mainly to the cumbersome nature of flatbed scanners. "It's been hard for them because scanners have been bulky and overly complicated," he said. "But the ScanSnap S500 eliminates the complexity, and its compact size makes it easy to work with."

The Paper Chase

Using Cabinet NG, www.cabinetng.com you can scan documents, convert them into electronic images and file them in the system's electronic file cabinets. Any document can be scanned, including invoices, purchase requests, bills, credit card charges, estimates and more. You can quickly searched for and call up digitized and filed documents

Cabinet NG effectively organizes electronic documents in virtual file cabinets, which hold file folders, which, in turn, house tabbed groups of documents. You can also virtually "clip" or "staple" documents that need to stay together, even if they aren't scanned or entered at the same time.

Searches are easy to initiate and perform. You can enter up to five keywords and choose to search all of the text in every document, or perform targeted searches that focus on specific cabinets or file folders

A useful function called the "CNG-Publisher" lets you create documents in other applications, such as Microsoft Word or Excel — or Intuit's QuickBooks — and immediately save and file them in Cabinet NG. If a document can be printed in the program that created it, it can be forwarded to and filed in Cabinet NG as a TIF, DMX or [PDF](#) image format file.

Using Windows Explorer, you can drag and drop image files onto a CNG-Filer icon. The software then asks for a user name, cabinet name and other information, and then it files the document. You can also save and file e-mails by dragging and dropping them through Cabinet's built-in e-mail support feature, which works with [MAPI](#)-compliant e-mail programs such as Outlook, Eudora, Pegasus and others.

A plus for companies that use QuickBooks, data entry personnel can create bills and credit card charges and receive payments directly through CNG-Books without accessing QuickBooks. This eliminates the need for duplicate data entry in order to manage and store the document and record the transaction in QuickBooks — a slick and powerful feature. Once in place, the features are straightforward for employees to use: the work lies in the setup and configuration.

Cabinet NG lets you route folders to other people who use the system, which is akin to putting a paper folder in someone else's inbox. You can also e-mail documents from Cabinet NG to other folks.

According to the company, you don't need to maintain two copies of a document, one on a computer's local hard drive and the other in Cabinet NG.

Administration

If you decide to give Cabinet NG a shot, you'll need to designate someone as a system administrator. The admin installs the software, sets up the file cabinets and document filing izgroups and creates and assigns access rights. It takes some technical savvy, so choose someone who is comfortable installing and configuring software, working with networks and who knows his or her way around the company's organization and current filing system.

Cabinet NG is flexible enough to mimic an existing filing system. If your company currently files clients alphabetically, by office, color codes or representatives, you can file in the same way within Cabinet NG. In fact, the company recommends that you recreate your existing filing system so that it's easier for employees to learn and adapt to the new system. If you have a database of clients, you can also import them into the program via comma delimited text files.

There are many content management solutions on the market, but few can match the ease and features of [SpringCM](#), which is simple and inexpensive enough for small offices, yet robust enough for even the largest teams. www.springcm.com

SpringCM falls in the growing software-as-a-service (SaaS) category, so there's never anything to install on your end, either upfront or for upgrades. The company handles all maintenance and upgrading. You even add new members online.

Users access SpringCM through a browser, which lets remote workers reach their documents at any time. If your company has an intranet, you can easily link to it and even substitute a logo to brand it as part of your site.

Besides managing your online documents, SpringCM can handle your printed docs, too. The company has partnered with a printing firm in Chicago, so that you can print and even mail documents through SpringCM. You can print out a thousand bound manuals, have them mailed to your clients, and never even have to see them.

11. Secure Remote Access

Top Three:

www.gotomypc.com

www.symantec.com/pcanywhere/

www.logmein.com

Last October, [Eli, Inc.](#), www.trusteli.com announced TrustEli, an all-in-one security appliance featuring a wireless router with a managed service that provides, monitors and maintains firewall, anti-virus, anti-spam and content-filtering capabilities.

Today, the company announced it's taking that appliance a step further by adding remote access — in the form of secure [VPN](#) — to the mix. What's more, the company says that the new device, Eli VPN,

eliminates the complexity and reduces the cost of setting up VPNs. It further claims that Eli VPN lets any small business create a VPN with the click of a mouse.

Historically, establishing a VPN entailed a lot of money and a lot of IT expertise – two conditions that kept many small businesses from taking advantage of the highly secure remote-access technology. According to Susan Lutz, Eli Inc.'s founder and CEO, a small business that wanted a VPN had no choice but to hire pricey consultants.

Complexity is the other issue that Eli, Inc. says it's addressed with the new appliance. A browser-based wizard walks you through setting up the VPN, which Lutz says takes a matter of minutes. "We've taken the mystery and intimidation out of setting up a VPN," she said. "It is so simple that you can set one up on the fly to provision a remote office, partner or customer for a day if you had to – or even an hour."

One of the key attributes VPN technology offers is rock-solid security – the remote connection is encrypted end-to-end. Lutz said that Eli VPN provides 256-bit AES strong encryption. Frame of reference: The US government has approved the use of AES encryption for classified information.

In addition to the VPN capability, Eli VPN offers the same security functions as the TrustEli appliance: anti-virus, spam control and content filtering. The managed service updates a minimum of 30 times a day for the latest definitions of viruses, spam, malware, phishing and more, according to the company.

Pricing: Eli VPN: \$249

To create a VPN, you need a device at each location. For example, you'd need three devices to service a main office and two branch offices.

Managed service: Eli VPN is designed for offices with up to 25 users. Monthly subscription pricing is as follows:

- Five-user license: \$19.99 per month
- 10-user license: \$29.99 per month
- 25-user license: \$39.99 per month

[Linksys Wireless-G Broadband Router with SpeedBooster and SecureEasySetup](#) demonstrates how the company dominates home and small business networking by providing what its customers need. This all-in-one product includes an Internet-sharing router, 4-port switch and a performance-enhanced Wireless-G Access Point. www.linksys.com

LinkSys' SecureEasySetup (SES), rather than forcing you to deal with the details of a router's security configuration, SES lets you configure the SSID and encryption keys on both the router and the client with the press of a button (two buttons, actually: one on the router and one on the client).

Coming in at well under the \$100 price range (\$89.99), it's an attractive wireless security solution, and one we weren't surprised to see taking top honors in the wireless security category.

12. Trusted IT Consultant/Provider

Since most small businesses don't need and can't afford a full-time IT person, many frequently rely on a friend, relative or cousin to handle computer support. But as IT becomes mission critical to small businesses, a quiet revolution is taking place. As networks and security issues become increasingly sophisticated and state and federal compliance regulations affect more and more small to medium businesses, many companies have found that turning over their support function to a company that specializes in providing such services is a better option.

In fact, it's often more productive to hire an outside company that offers a combination of part-time on-site IT support with on-call helpdesk available in case problems arise when the on-site person is not around. In recent years, an entire cottage industry of "Geeks'R'Us" companies has appeared to answer the need for reliable, quality part-time IT support for small businesses.

Before entering into an outsourcing relationship with an IT services company, however, you need to understand exactly what you should outsource and what to keep in-house. This month we look at how to choose an outsourced IT support solution that best suits your business.

Available Services

No matter what your exact IT requirements, you'll find a company that's ready to work with you. Many IT support companies were started by people who previously provided tech support services in larger companies. As the bigger companies standardized their systems, the need for legions of IT support staff diminished. At the same time, the need for support in small companies has dramatically increased. Voila, an opportunity was born and thousands of entrepreneurial computer support personnel started their own IT support companies dedicated to the home and small business markets.

You'll find IT support companies that specialize in servicing architectural firms, law offices, insurance agencies — you name it. The benefit: they'll be familiar and comfortable with the software and applications commonly used in your industry. Service options range from per-call support (for the budget conscious), to full staffing of an entire IT department. You can arrange for a monthly or yearly contract that guarantees you access to a specified number of support hours.

Identifying Your Support Needs

The decision to outsource your IT support might sound simple, but if you don't know what your requirements are, you might find yourself paying for services you don't need, or worse, finding that you don't have enough coverage. If you're comfortable with a provider that's available during standard business hours, you'll pay a lot less than you would if you needed extended hours or 24/7 support.

If you own a very small business or you're cost sensitive, you might be interested in a service that provides per-call or per-incident support rather than a monthly service contract. Think about how much on-site support you really need. Having a part-time person visit on a weekly or monthly basis can substantially cut your support services bills.

Some outsourcing companies claim that they will save you money because you won't have to pay employee benefits, but that's not always true. After all someone has to pay the staffing costs, either directly or indirectly.

Finding an IT service company that supports a generic Microsoft office environment with a file server or two is relatively easy, but if you have specialized software and hardware, you should consider a provider that's familiar with your unique requirements.

For example, an engineering company needs support for their specialized applications while a small retail shop might need someone familiar with point of sale (POS) solutions. If you are in a niche industry, look for a company that advertises that they service your industry. Often these specialized providers have worked in the industry or have previously held full-time positions supporting similar companies.

Keep the tech support in-house only if you would have difficulty locating a person with the specialized knowledge that you need, or if you're sensitive to giving control of an important business function to an outside party. Service Level Agreements and contracts are great, but they're only as good as the business relationship. You might be able to take the vendor to court, but don't count on much recourse if things go wrong.

Choosing the Right IT Partner

It's important to make sure that your IT support service can deliver the services that you need. Many providers tout that their staff's vendor certifications, but that only guarantees that they were able to pass an exam. It doesn't demonstrate the ability to troubleshoot or address your support needs.

Remember, this company will have all the passwords and know all your company secrets, so it's important that you trust them implicitly. Many people find their IT partners through word of mouth

from other companies in the same business. References from satisfied customers are your best assurance that the company can deliver the promised services.

Ask potential IT providers about the size of the company and how they maintain their accounts. Many providers assign a one person to service your account. You benefit because they get to know you and are generally more responsive to your needs, but the downside is that if they leave, the replacement might need to be retrained if the provider doesn't track of your account history in other ways.

As for vendor size, several large, national companies have started servicing SMBs, but most of them can't compete with the low overhead and personalized service of a Joe Geek who has only four accounts. Your decision should be based on your comfort level with the specific provider rather than the company size.

You need to ask them how they would normally provide support. Often the service provider has a standard way of doing things that might not suit your needs. If the answer is a list of cookie cutter applications and a requirement that you conform to their way of doing things, walk away. They will not be responsive to your specific requirements. You're buying services, not an off the shelf product.

The Bottom Line

Seriously consider outsourcing your IT support if you don't need a full-time person but you do need flexible services that you can't provide in-house. A good relationship with the right service provider — where the outsourcer is more like a true business partner — will ensure that your operation runs smoothly and that your business will be more productive.

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