

What is the best way to manage and maintain your small-business computer system?

By Leonard DiCostanzo

When you first started your business – whether it was a staffing company, a mechanical contractor or a prosthetic manufacturer – you wanted it to be the best. And from the start, you needed technology to support your business efforts. Maybe you started with one or two PCs, and now you've worked up to several PCs, laptops, printers and other technology components networked together to support your business efforts. You did all the work. You bought the PCs, maybe even set them up. You are the person your staff goes to with computer problems.

But how do you educate yourself on using technology to support your business? How do you learn to support the growing collection of technology devices being used in your business? How can you possibly balance the dreams of growing your business and supporting your technology infrastructure?

If these questions sound familiar, a couple of real-life scenarios can help you see the light and perhaps guide you to deciding the best way to manage and administer your company's computer systems.

Technology as a hobby

John Phillips is vice president of operations at Phillips Precision, a prosthetics manufacturer. Phillips' parents started the business, and now he and his family run it together.

When he first graduated from college and into the family business, Phillips did not know anything about computers. As he worked in the business from the bottom up, he saw first-hand what it took to deliver the company's product. And after an accidental meeting with a friend who was using AutoCAD, he got bit by the technology bug. He realized how technology could vastly improve productivity and help Phillips Precision grow revenue without growing overhead.

Once he saw the family business had a need for technology, Phillips gravitated toward fulfilling the need – because there was no one else to do it. First, he made sure he knew about PCs and related networking technology through reading. He also attended a basic computer class so that he knew the guts of a PC. He did not want to be fooled by any salesperson trying to sell him PCs and solutions at prices that did not meet his business needs. Phillips started by replacing the company's aging PCs with upgraded PCs running Windows.

Doing most of the work by himself, Phillips set up basic office productivity applications, like MS Office and some databases holding key company information. He began to migrate (or descend!) into the life of a computer engineer. Calling it a hobby, he went through each menu option of every application he purchased so he could see it function and decide how to use it in his company. Talk about detail: "I did not want to spend the money and just do the basics," he says. "I wanted our company to realize any benefit possible from the applications we purchased."

The system grows

Soon, Phillips realized it was not very efficient to update individual PCs with company data

and exchange data between PCs via floppy disk. A network was implemented. Then came Internet access, e-mail, CAD/CAM applications, virus software and remote access. He was also answering tech questions from the staff. Whew! You get the picture. Phillips was now the director of technology, even though his real job title was VP of operations. He was constantly hacking away at his computer and applications, trying to learn the best applications for his business.

It didn't take long for productivity in Phillips' real job to be affected. The network had gotten too big and complex. He began to look for a company that could help. Perhaps he could outsource some of the technology work he was doing to a local computer company and hire someone to handle the internal technology workload.

So Phillips hired someone to handle the technology in his company. "I thought the problems would go away," he declares. "I would hand off technology to the new person and go back to my real job." It worked out well for a while, but the employee ended up being released because there was not enough work for one person with basic computer skills, especially someone who could not do the higher level work sometimes required on the network. Phillips still had to do tech work.

Right person, right job

Phillips realized that although his network was big and complex to him, any budding computer engineer would get bored in his environment. He decided to hire an apprentice engineer who would be responsible for executing computer tasks and performing other office responsibilities. Phillips would still stay involved by managing the engineer, but he would be able to gain back some time for his real job.

The person was hired. Phillips knows this person will leave eventually, but he is prepared to break someone else in. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he says.

In addition to his internal part-time staffer, Phillips developed a relationship with a local technology company. As a result, he decided to outsource his project work. "I remember hacking away, trying to set up my remote access solution," he observes. "I was buried. Now, I leave projects to my technology vendors and rely on them. And I have more time on my hands to make things happen at the company."

Phillips found a happy medium for his company and himself. He still has technology headaches, but it goes with the job. As he puts it, "Implementing key technology solutions in the business is my pet project. I am not sure if I can ever let go completely."

I don't want to do this anymore!

Steve Dressler found himself in a position similar to Phillips. That is one of the reasons he is now at his new job as CFO of F&G Mechanical/Comfort Systems. At his old company, where he was CFO, Steve had to tend to all technology issues. He learned on the job, and at times, he had to read a couple of books and attend some application classes.

While the company thought this was a cost-effective way to resolve technology needs, Dressler saw it as a drain on his ability to fulfill his own job responsibilities. He knew the end of his days with technology was near when he found himself tending to a downed file server instead of finalizing the company's sales projections for the coming year.

At his new company, Dressler has been able to outsource the management and maintenance of the firm's technology department to a technology partner. "They handle everything from help desk calls, to capital projects, to budget planning," he notes. "I worry about the numbers, where to charge them in the company and how to pay for them. It is has been a good fit for us so far."

The company management has often thought about hiring staff to handle technology because it believed it would be cheaper than outsourcing. Yet in the last five years, three technology people have joined and left the company after a short time. Working with his outsourced technology partner for the last couple of years has convinced Dressler that it's the right choice. "A technology company can focus on technology and be the experts. They can run it cheaper and better than we can. We just had to find the right partner. We were lucky to do that," he says.

What do you do?

There are many different scenarios that could be playing out in your company. The bottom line is that your business needs technology to support operations. It must be maintained, upgraded and expanded as business needs dictate. This could be a full- or part-time job. Computers are not TVs just yet.

Business owners need to realize that technology is best managed by people who are focused on technology and who work every day to determine how to apply it to the needs of the business. Whether that person is you, someone you hire or an outsourcing partner, technology is a job. It takes education, knowledge and experience to stay on top of it. Most importantly, it takes time!

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