

How to use productivity tools

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We're looking at a decent to good year. Any suggestions for getting our productivity tools up to date? We're a business-to-business seller of services and have 12 people in our main office plus staffers at our three area stores, at a warehouse and on the road.

Figuring out how to use productivity tools can save both time and money. When you're ramping up, saving money may be the biggest factor. Once you're off and running, saving time will be a big payoff. With the current staff this company has, saving one to two hours per person per week will be like being able to operate effectively with one less employee. That's real savings!

Getting everyone onto the computer is game number-one in today's world. Using computers makes it faster to file and retrieve data, analyze what's going on, and share and process information. They are huge productivity tools.

KEEP IT CENTRAL

As you grow, and deal with many people in many places accessing different programs for different reasons at different times, things can get complicated. Not everyone needs access to the same programs or access at the same time. And people move from location to location, periodically needing to get at information they traditionally keep on their computer in their office. You may find that having workstations in each store, the warehouse and headquarters provides real time access without the cost of everyone carrying around a laptop loaded with software they don't always use. Centralized data means people don't have to run back to the office to print out a report, or check on a file - they have access from any location.

Options for computers keep getting better. Moving from several disconnected computers to centralization is cheaper and easier to accomplish. Talk to your IT specialist about a terminal server environment, where you no longer spend big bucks for individual computers, but rather have everyone working off one main server - similar to the original DEC computing, which those of you with grey hairs may remember from the stone age of computers.

One advantage with terminal servers is you can dial in from all over the world, and work right on your server just as if you were sitting in the office. Another advantage is lower cost for the workstations, since they no longer need to be smart. A third advantage is control, as you can monitor what's going on with everyone who's using the system. Finally, there's usually much lower maintenance costs, as virus checking and update installations only happen on the terminal server.

It's also possible to work off internet versions of your standard programs. Internet options are available for many programs, from accounting to sales reporting to word processing. Here the advantages are continuous, backed up, real time access to large databases without having to maintain them on your server.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Then there's the tools that allow you to connect people. These are the greatest productivity gainers of all. There are many Web-conferencing vendors, looking to help you connect with the world from your desktop.

Web-conferencing means you can sign onto a visual and auditory presentation, and give others permission to join you. Whether you're presenting a word file, a spreadsheet, or an audio visual presentation; whatever you can show on your desktop, your conference attendees can see as well. You can allow all participants to talk with each other, limit the conversation to only the presenter, and anything in between. That's better than doing a presentation in front of an audience where it's up to the presenter to maintain control. Now you can do it with a push of a button!

Web conferences are also a great way to have internal meetings. No one wants to pull staff out of stores and the warehouse. How many times have you rushed out the door to a meeting, only to find you left a crucial file behind. Web-conferencing allows you to meet virtually, with files on the computer and ready to be shared with everyone.

Finally, storing data on central resources means less gets lost and more people have access, now and in the future. Insuring data - from word files to spreadsheets to specialized accounting, presentation and industry specific programs - means that people are better informed, more engaged, can move faster, and are in a position to make better decisions.

Looking for a good book? Try *Cloud Computing: Web Based Applications That Change the Way You Work and Collaborate Online*, by Michael Miller.

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