

IT matters, doesn't it?

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I guess most of you owning, running or managing a business have, at sometime or another, asked yourselves what to do about your IT. On the one hand it's just computers; you have one at home and so have the kids. On the other, our business world is passing us by when our computers are not working.

It is generally accepted that IT is essential and can provide opportunities to improve and develop business performance. The truth is that IT is now seen as a service rather than just the purchase of products and so the provision of IT services should be distinguished from the retail sector.

There are, of course, many levels of IT in relation to the performance of any business or organisation. In a series of articles we shall touch on a range of topics, hopefully providing some food for thought for our business people, from the one-man home/office to larger entities of our business community. This month we shall start at the micro to small business sector, although the underlying principles are generic.



Office tools

Computers blend into the background when things are fine. They stick out like a sore thumb when they are not, and let's face it, computers do go wrong at the most inconvenient times and can do so more often than other business infrastructure such as electricity and telephones. So what should you be looking for?

First of all, I would advocate that you take your IT infrastructure seriously enough to invest in seeking out professional IT services if you are worried about your current set-up, wish to upgrade, or simply are not sure where your infrastructure sits in the current world of IT. Here are some points for you to consider and where professionals can assist in reviewing your requirements.

- PC specification: remember though, that you are unlikely to be using them to calculate Gibraltar's weather patterns.
- Standardised anti-virus protection and increasingly anti-spam: make sure you understand the difference, the different means of protection and associated overheads.
- File/data structure: this is the way files are stored, accessed and used by all levels of staff.
- Network access protection. Make sure that you have a proper assessment so you

understand the realities and the risks, to remove basic holes and to assess your actual requirements for external access, if any, and how best to protect yourself.

- When it comes to "fiddling" with your computer, it is best left to professionals. However if you have to, then try it at home first. In the office however, time is money, not to mention the stress of falling further behind, or worse still losing data. In the end, you will call on the services of a professional and swear blind you have not touched anything!

IT infrastructure development

The truth is that any proper risk assessment of a developing/growing business should identify where your IT infrastructure is holding you back in your development or operational effectiveness.

This can be done by having a frank and open discussion with your preferred IT professional who should be able to provide you with ideas and/or solutions. He/she will also not be afraid to bring you down to earth from some of your more fanciful schemes. Trust comes into it; just as you would take crucial advice from your trusted accountant or lawyer, so you should discuss these matters with experienced system implementers and maintainers. At the end of the day, anything is possible; however there are four key points to balance in the equation.

- a) Usefulness or effectiveness
How useful is this function within the business plan or strategy? How effective do you expect it to be?
- b) Time to implementation
How long will it take to fully implement? Will it miss the boat if it misses its target? Is it short, medium or long term?
- c) Internal time investment and robustness

Are you looking for something with no maintenance, or are you willing to invest time in setting it up and maintaining it.

d) Cost

All of the above will impact on the cost, or your budget will influence your approach to the above. Again your discussion with your trusted IT professional will take this into account. A relationship with professional services will allow you to make provision in your annual budgets.

IT support and maintenance

IT support and maintenance can be classified in many ways. One high level distinction is reactive and proactive. Reactive means the correction of a problem which may have developed due to malfunction of hardware or software. The problem is corrected and some advice may or may not be provided.

Proactive maintenance requires a longer-term support. Typically, you will be engaged in a working relationship with IT professionals who can assess the wider implications of individual problems, foresee areas of weakness and identify corrective action and areas of opportunities in an honest manner.

IT services and products can get complex and costly beyond the basic office requirements. Some areas for further investigation are:

- The possibilities that the Internet provide beyond the website, e.g. decentralised or multi-site operations, remote access and backups, mobility.
- Improvement in the internal systems management and administration.
- Data distribution, management and monitoring of IT services and data within a site.

IT products supply

Lastly you are probably wondering when I was going to come round to the subject of purchasing of equipment. Well here too it's horses for courses. Some providers of IT equipment will have most basic components of computer systems. A base unit (that's the box with the processor, RAM, hard drive etc), a monitor, printer. Increasingly local competition and competition from over the border means that pricing is keener, which is a good thing across the business sector, since IT is as important investment for any business or organisation.