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Managing New Technology



Whether it's the latest and greatest computer equipment, operating system, or a sleekly designed PDA with wireless Web access, a new technology is born every day. If you follow the hyped-up press about the latest hardware, software, and business tools, you may feel pressure to buy into these new technologies. While cutting-edge technology may enhance your small business and the way you run it, it's important to discern what you need and what

you don't. Consider the following points before investing your company's capital in the next big thing.

Do your research

It is easier for you to decide whether your small business truly needs this new technology if you understand it. Conducting some background research into the product is a good place to start.

- Read as much information as you can about it, including product reviews and user comments. The information you seek should be relevant to your particular business. What works for a large Web site may not work for a small retail store.
- Research the requirements for new technology. Will it work with the rest of your small business? For example, if you want to perform a company-wide upgrade to a more recent operating system, will the drivers for your printers, as well your current software, be compatible with the new OS? If your peripherals or applications have been around for a while, they may not be compatible. Take a look around your business and think about how the introduction of this new technology will affect the existing technology.

Look ahead

Think about the growth and development you expect your small business to experience in the coming years. Purchase technology that will be easy to upgrade or add on to in the future, rather than something you will have to replace all together when your needs change. Changing integrated technology such as software or applications can be expensive.

Do you need it?

Although it may be tempting to indulge in every newly released application, technology, or hardware, one of the first questions you should ask yourself is whether you actually need it. Consider these points.

- Avoid buying technology just because it's new; if it's not broke, don't fix it. New technology like the programming language XML is getting lots of press coverage in e-business news, but if your Web site is already up and bringing in good traffic, it may be unnecessary for you to implement the use of XML right now.
- Establish a list of goals and concerns for your business before investing in new equipment or software. Examine your company's core business function and the challenges facing you, in accomplishing your goals. If implementing new technology can help you overcome those challenges, it may be worth your money.
- Think about which features of this technology are necessary, which are desirable, and which are just bells and whistles that don't serve your primary business objectives.
- If you discover you do need this tool, buy it. Making do with inadequate equipment can cost you more in time and money than you save by not investing in new equipment.

Do you need it . . . now?

Another question to ask yourself: Can you wait a year to buy a technology that will be less expensive then? Prices often drop drastically once the novelty of a new invention has passed. You'll also be able to hear more about real-world experiences with the technology; after many businesses have used it, you'll be able to find out if it works as well as its manufacturers claim.

In general, there will be more information and resources available once a new technology has been on the market for a while. You will also have access to IT professionals who have more experience with the technology, rather than

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dealing with people who have just learned its ins-and-outs. And, it's always possible that there will be something to better suit your needs in a year.

Work with what you already have

Upgrading to a compatible product that expands your capabilities is usually less expensive than repeatedly purchasing brand-new technologies that are less familiar to you and your employees. Installing new technology can be costly and time consuming for your business -- you must learn how to use it, train your employees, and in some cases, transfer data to the new system, or purchase related hardware, software, or peripherals.

Hang on longer to the technology that is working for you, by performing regular maintenance to extend its life. Like changing oil in your car, upkeep to current tools can be much less expensive than replacing them early.

Consider the hidden costs

Some new technologies might seem relatively inexpensive, but if you don't already employ an IT staff, you might have to hire someone or get contractors, both of which can be a large expense for your business.

Once you decide to buy

Once you decide to make the investment, make sure your purchase is a wise one. While saving money is important, you'll waste it by investing in technology that cannot handle the needs of your business. Invest in upgradeable technology that will be useful for a long period of time instead of investing in whatever is hot right now.

Once you arrive at your decision, compile a list of concerns to address each time you consider adding new technology to your small business. While flashy new technology can be tempting, keep your business objectives in mind to decide if this product that's all the rage is also necessary. In the end, you will thank yourself for being patient, considering all the possibilities, and making well-thought out decisions before purchasing a new technology.

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