Where will YOUR business be in six months time?

Six months goes mighty fast in business. It can take a couple of months to get an invoice paid. Four months to move office or open a new shop. Before you know it, half a year has gone by. Every small business should be thinking about what things might look like six months from now.

Things might look pretty rosy then, too: some commentators reckon that in six months we'll be seeing the green shoots of economic recovery. What will your business - and your lifestyle – look like?

Will you be lean and efficient, using the latest technology to beat the competition, or fumbling for scraps of paper and letting customers down? Will you be working at home and on the road with a smart new Netbook, or struggling into the office at weekends just to pick up documents? Will you be working a 60-hour week (as 14% of small business owners do) or seeing more of your friends and family?

It's never too late to think about the future. A recent survey from Barclays Bank found that, far from concentrating on survival alone, a majority of small companies saw the opportunity to 'leapfrog' the competition as a key advantage of the current downturn. 60% of companies surveyed said they had transformed their businesses for the better, using the slowdown as a chance to improve their businesses from within.

Time to employ some basic tools of the trade

Large companies have been using technology to brighten their outlook for many years now; and the good news is, much of that technology is available economically to even the smallest of businesses today.

So: what technology could you economically introduce right now, to prepare for a better business and an easier workload tomorrow? The humble server is worth investigating. A server is a computer, separate to the personal machines used by your staff, designed to take on all sorts of management jobs. Because it's not used by employees, it can be left in a corner to get on with things; and because it connects staff machines in a meaningful way, it can be used to help everyone collaborate securely.

Servers are the Swiss Army Knife of business technology: nothing much to look at, but useful for just about everything, surprisingly affordable, and being used by millions around the UK for more purposes than you'll ever find in the instruction manual:

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- Are you swapping documents around on USB sticks (or "dongles")? It's annoying and highly insecure. With a server, you can share files easily and in a controlled fashion.

- Would you like to access the office – files, programs and data – from home? Your server will administer remote access safely and reliably, and give different people in your organisation just the access they should be allowed – making flexible working a reality.

- Your server is a storage repository, saving data (and backups) fast and centrally. There will be no more grinding to a halt just because "Bob's on holiday and we can't get into his computer".

- Many programs, including specialist line-of-business tools are designed to run centrally; so not having a server could be seriously holding back your business.

- Finally, it's a security guard for the rest of your network, keeping threats to your business out, yet keeping the lights on so your team can work day or night.

Yes, yes, but will it save me money?

Your first server will almost certainly save you money in the long run. For starters, a server takes work away from your existing PCs and laptops. That will extend their lifespan and make a difference to cashflow. Many growing small companies find that their first server helps to put off other piecemeal IT buying by a couple of years.

Servers shave costs and drive efficiency without compromising on productivity, too. In a recent survey, 47% of businesses bought a new server because they envisaged savings like cheaper maintenance and energy efficiency. Those are gains that come without a sacrifice somewhere else in the business – as a server also increases performance (indeed another 19% bought servers to run new applications on their networks, and 10% just wanted to improve overall network performance). These sorts of figures suggest that if your network is running without a server, your business is running at a disadvantage.

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A path to profits: two new arrivals

Of course, every small business knows that savings don't count if they come at great expense. Typically, though, a server yields a return on investment within 12 months, and there are now ways to take a step-by-step approach to investment in servers. If you've never shared anything with colleagues before, you can make a start without any technical investment at all, thanks to Microsoft Online Services (MOLS).[1]

MOLS gives you access to a bundle of Microsoft's best collaboration tools (email, communications, document management and conferencing) entirely online, so you won't have to buy any equipment. Because MOLS is a hosted service, there are no upfront technology costs – which will work wonders for your all-important cashflow. There won't be any nasty surprises, either, as all maintenance and security is handled by the service provider, too. Instead, MOLS is simply available for a low, fixed, predictable monthly fee: in other words you can buy first class office technology in the same way as you buy something simple, like your mobile phone.

Another interesting new arrival is the Microsoft Foundation Server 2008. Microsoft's Gareth Hall says "It's an entry-level server which handles all the infrastructure needs of a small business (file and print sharing, remote access, security etc.) with simplified installation and simplified licensing for up to 15 employees. It's been brought to the market specifically following the feedback we've received from many hundreds of small businesses who have told us that they wanted to build their businesses around the full functionality of a server, but on frugal budgets". It's the perfect step-up for businesses seeking an advantage through technology, but mindful of deployment costs.

Rest assured, Foundation Server is totally compatible with its bigger brother, Windows Server 2008, the workhorse server found in thousands of businesses and running millions of applications across the globe. Indeed, on your 16th employee, Foundation Server 2008 can be upgraded to the full Windows Server 2008 package with a simple new licensing key. There's no reconfiguration required, and it won't cost a penny more than buying the full Windows Server 2008 in the first place. "Foundation Server 2008 supports new businesses as they start up, with no penalty when it comes to upgrading whatsoever", says Hall.

And when you're ready to take the plunge (and we know only too well that many small businesses don't have an IT department, so it really is you), Microsoft's network of Small Business Specialist Partners will be on hand to help you make the right choice of server.

Joining the Big League!

Foundation Server and Windows Server give every business a safe, secure and highly productive way to store and share information. The next step up is Microsoft Small Business Server (SBS), which includes a raft of best-of-breed software and services in the server package. SBS includes Microsoft Exchange for email, shared calendaring and email web access. Collaboration is made easy – even if you want to share files with customers or other people outside the business. And SBS makes going mobile a doddle – giving sales staff on the road access to their email on a mobile phone or PDA is as simple as flipping a virtual switch.

You won't need much help – but when you do, get it from a pro.

Your server is designed to be easy to maintain; and comes out of the box configured for optimum security. "Many small businesses put off getting a server because they think it's going to be complicated; it's going to be 'techie', it's going to be something else to go wrong," says Hall. "It's not like that at all – a server is the stable, reliable basis for the rest of your office IT- and that's why our servers are in use in millions of companies worldwide".

You can get bags of help from the nationwide network of Small Business Specialist Partners who not only install servers every day, but also know exactly what it feels like to run a small business – because they do so themselves.

Chris Harry of Imtex Technologies, a Small Business Specialist in Milton Keynes, says "For whatever reason a company first installs a server, in my experience it soon becomes the infrastructure on which everything else they need is built. They immediately find that they can share files faster, and they find that maintenance, security and anti-virus protection is more effective than with standalone PCs. But then they realise they can add features: remote access, sharing, printer management, customer management tools and all sorts of other productivity software which would be closed to them if they didn't have a server."

"One of my clients is a recruitment firm who originally bought a server in order to run a database application; to track their clients and job candidates. Now, of course, they use their server to run applications on their mobile phones, and they're connected to the office from home, too. It's totally changed the way they work. Another of our customers specialise in building inspections, which of course means staff travelling across the UK. Thanks to their server and remote access, staff never need to be disconnected from the office, and it saves field workers many hours of otherwise pointless travel time."

"It's also important not to forget the value of your own time as a business owner. A server makes adding user accounts simple – very much like adding your kids to your PC at home – whereas without a server the process has to be done by hand. If you've ever wasted time trying to configure individual PCs (or, worse still, realised that private information like salaries was open to prying eyes on your desktop machine), you'll know that a server isn't a 'nice-to-have', it's a valid and essential business tool."

Thinking about a server?
Try Chris Harry's 5 Magic Bullets:

- A server offers quick wins which you can enjoy straight away. Think about giving staff mobile and web access to their email and files. They can also control their own desktop PCs from anywhere.

- Build your business on better IT. A professionally-installed server gives you better security, an IT environment built around best practice standards, and maintenance that's more predictable. "If you're knee-deep in cables when you should be making sales calls, it's time to rationalise your technology", says Harry.

- Get an expert in to help. 90% of Microsoft SBS servers are installed by Partners, because they're both a safe and experienced pair of hands.

- Remember your people. Central file storage can be a challenge for some staff – especially the more secretive ones! Give them time to acclimatise, and help them get the most out of your IT investment.

- You can afford it. Microsoft Financing spreads payments across up to 5 years, and is available for as little as £1000. And because financing can cover not only hardware but also software, installation from a Partner and associated training, you really can minimise the capital outlay. "We've just had compliments on Financing from an accountant," says Harry, "so I don't think there's a higher accolade than that!"

1. *MOLS is available for companies of five or more employees.*

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