

Empowering Your Business

Smarter Business Guide to Technology

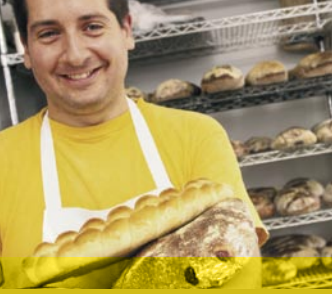


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Productivity

Focusing on success

Irish businesses are facing two big issues today, despite operating in a generally positive economic environment.

The first is the rising cost of doing business, which has risen dramatically in Ireland over the last number of years. The second is that the labour market is now very constrained. It is harder for all businesses, especially small businesses, to increase workforces. Our response to these two issues is to ask how a technology company can help.

Earlier this year, to mark its twentieth anniversary of investing in Ireland, Microsoft commissioned an in-depth economic study into the issue of productivity, authored by the economist Paul Tansey. The economist identified labour force growth and productivity growth as the primary drivers for economic success in the future.

An owner-manager either wants to increase their profits or grow their business. So when you are faced with the situation of rising costs and a tight labour market, the only way you can achieve that is by improving productivity.

Tansey concludes that productivity growth can be accelerated by three main factors. The first is by increasing investment in physical capital. Secondly, Tansey stresses the necessity to increase investment in our workforce through upskilling, education and training. This focus upgrades employee skills and management capabilities. Thirdly, the report recommends investment in ICT, Microsoft's core area of expertise.

There are three things we focus on at Microsoft for SMEs. Firstly, we have tailored our server and end user technology to meet the specific needs of small business, and therefore provide a range of tools that help small businesses become more productive.

Secondly, Microsoft does not operate in isolation. We work with hundreds of partners across the country, including many that focus primarily on the SME market. Most of these partners are, in fact, SMEs themselves, so they are familiar with building tailored solutions using Microsoft technologies.

Microsoft's third focus for the SME is a new one. Microsoft believes that in order for continued economic growth and prosperity in Ireland, SMEs must be supported in becoming more productive, innovative and competitive. Effective implementation and training in ICT has been identified as one of the primary mechanisms to achieve these goals.

To this end, Microsoft has developed the EU Grants Advisor programme with a number of Irish private and public partners. This programme helps SMEs to discover what types of grant aid they are eligible for, to assist them in applying for this aid and to manage the administrative process of obtaining funding.

At Microsoft we are focused on delivering integrated software so SMEs can start, grow and thrive. We are committed to ensuring that our products work well together and are strongly supported through a community of well-trained technology providers that can help you realise the full benefits of your IT investments.

This guide sets out to show how IT solutions can significantly increase your productivity by improving the effectiveness of your business and the efficiency of all your employees. Microsoft Ireland is delighted to partner with the Chambers and to help Irish businesses reach their potential by sponsoring this Smarter Business Guide to Technology. If you want to find out more about how to harness your potential and become more productive visit www.productivity.ie where you can look at a number of case studies and white papers and download a copy of Paul Tansey's Report, Productivity: Ireland's Economic Imperative.



Managing your business

Adding efficiency

The implementation of technology is a proven way to increase the efficiency of your business. But it is vital that technology, like any other resource within your business, is properly managed. The simplest and most effective way of doing this is by using a server.

What is a server?

A server is a central computer that links together all the other computers in your company. A technology set-up like this is called a network.

What is a network?

A network links computers together so that they can access shared resources like internet connections, files, fax machines and printers. Network links are made using wires that are similar to phone cables but increasingly businesses use wireless networks which use radio links instead of physical connections. A server computer running a network operating system like Microsoft Small Business Server 2003, is used in the centre of this network and controls all network activity. Sometimes businesses set up an ad-hoc network without a server, sometimes called a peer-to-peer network. This can work well when there are only a couple of PCs to connect, but it does not offer the flexibility, ease of management, reliability or security of a server-based network.

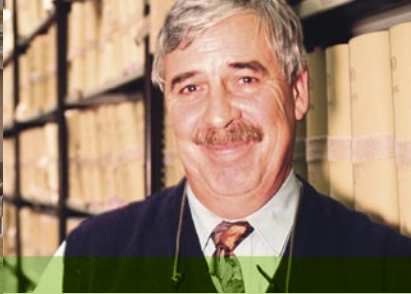
The benefits of a server

1. Organise your information in a central location for increased productivity

A server provides a central location to store your company data. Employees will be able to easily find the right information they need and access the most recent versions of files. Shared record keeping means fewer disconnected pockets of information, and less time wasted searching for files and managing different versions of files. According to Forbes.com, businesses using Windows Small Business Server 2003 reported that, on average, their employees were able to be 20% more productive on the job.

2. Guard against data loss

Company data is the lifeblood of any company. Without it you could potentially go out of business. It is therefore critical to ensure that you are backing-up this data on a regular basis. Servers can offer a comprehensive, automated back-up solution. It enables you to easily back-up company information on a regular basis to guard against data loss. What's more, your employees can quickly and easily retrieve files they accidentally deleted, and restore files to their previous versions.



Remote access

Once you have your email and your data on a server, it's easy to access it (safely and securely) over the Internet from home, from your Smartphone or even from an internet café. This makes flexible working and mobile working much easier.



Share internet connections

Many small businesses connect to the Internet the same way a home user does, with a dial-up account from an internet service provider. However, when you add staff, it becomes very expensive to add new phone lines and new accounts for them. By using a server, you can share a single fast, broadband internet connection.

Share printers

You can attach several printers to one server and everybody on the network can print to them, just as if they were attached to their own computer. This means you don't need to buy everyone their own dedicated printer. Not only that but you can easily share expensive devices like colour laser printers.

Send and receive faxes

Isn't it annoying when you want to send a fax and there's a queue? Using SBS 2003, anyone can send faxes from their own computer just like sending a document to a printer. Incoming faxes are delivered to your computer by email or they can be printed out on any printer.

Stop viruses and hackers

A server also works like an electronic bouncer to keep internet riff-raff away from your company's network. It can also help you filter out unwanted junk email and streamline the process of updating your other computers with the latest security patches from Microsoft.



Run a database

Many sophisticated business applications use the SQL database Standard and the Premium Edition of SBS 2003 which includes Microsoft SQL Server™ 2000, a top-of-the-line multi-user database server.



Server computer running SBS 2003



Host an internal website

An intranet site is a website that is only available to employees of your company. This means you can use it to share important company information like phone directories, staff photos, documents and company news. SBS 2003 lets you create an intranet site easily.

Keep electronic diaries

Using a server to store digital diaries, address books and task lists makes it easier to organise meetings and co-ordinate work with your colleagues. It also means that all your critical business data is available on your PC, your laptop, your Smartphone or via an internet browser.



Back-up your data

Backing up files brings peace of mind. However, if files are kept on different machines, it is fiddly to make sure they are all regularly backed up. On the other hand if they are all stored on a server, it is much easier. SBS 2003 comes with backup software that makes it simple to set up regular backups of your key data.

Share files

Instead of important files being scattered around the office on different people's computers, a server stores them in a central place but you can access them as if they were on your own computer. You control who can see which files, so confidential files stay confidential.

Customer relationship management

Sometimes the hardest thing in business is keeping in touch with customers and following up new business leads. Keeping your customer information on a central server means that it is available to your sales staff and information doesn't get entered more than once.

Exchange email

SBS 2003 handles all your internal email, routing it from one employee to another. Because it no longer has to go over the internet it is more secure. It also sends and receives emails over the Internet to outsiders. This means that you can have your own company email address. Also, all your email is centrally stored and backed up automatically.



3. Protect your business information

Servers can provide a secure infrastructure that protects your business from unauthorised users. Built-in firewall protection and secure remote access guards your network and keeps your data secure against malicious threats, such as viruses and worms. Tools are available to manage and monitor internet access within your business. Spammers (unwanted email) are blocked with effective junk mail controls, and dangerous email attachments are automatically removed to help prevent virus attacks.

4. Access business information and resources from virtually anywhere, anytime

With the right server you can be productive while away from the office. It's easy for you and your employees to work remotely and to stay connected to your important business information and resources from virtually anywhere. When out of the office, you can access your email, internal website, network files and even your business applications. Using any computer that has an internet connection, you can:

- Securely access your personal office desktop, along with all the shared information and resources maintained in your server's centralised database
- Easily access your email, schedule, and contacts using an internet-enabled computer or Windows mobile-based device
- Communicate in real-time to stay current with your company and customers.



5. Share resources and reduce costs

Get the most value from your technology investment. Server technology can provide a complete network solution that enables your business to get more done, more cost effectively because your company can:

- Share resources, such as internet access and business software
- Share equipment, including printers and fax machines
- Fax with fewer phone lines, because you can send faxes directly from computers.

6. Get a platform that is easy to grow with today and tomorrow

Make sure the server you choose provides a versatile platform that can be customised to your needs. Affordable today, and scalable for tomorrow, it needs to provide a solid building block for future technology enhancements to your business. For example, Windows Small Business Server 2003 has the flexibility to grow with your company. As your business expands, you can migrate easily to other Windows Server 2003 products.



Chambers in action

Powering growth

Chambers Ireland is using the information sharing, security and remote working capabilities of Microsoft Small Business Server (SBS) 2003 to enable it to successfully pursue its growth strategy

Chambers Ireland relies heavily on technology to communicate and collaborate with its members throughout Ireland. Hence, information sharing, storage and security are key necessities to its operation.

Situation

Chambers Ireland recently undertook a programme to boost its membership. Its objective was to almost double chamber membership by 2007.

In order to achieve these growth projections, Chambers Ireland, which had outgrown its existing IT system, had to act quickly to re-evaluate its IT requirements.

Chambers Ireland needed to:

- Engage an IT provider that understood the needs of a small business
- Increase its ability to communicate with the chamber network spread throughout Ireland
- Enable remote access to email and data
- Enable collaboration on documents and projects

- Enable quick access to and sharing of information
- Reliably store and back-up data
- Overcome the constraints of limited office space.

Solution: Microsoft Small Business Server 2003

"We had grown substantially in a short space of time and had ambitious plans and new targets," says Conor Brennan, deputy chief executive and head of chamber development. "We knew we needed to find an IT partner and system that suited our growing requirements."

Like most small companies, it does not employ a full-time IT manager and relies on external IT support. However, on a tight budget, with limited technology know-how and in a competitive and pressurised environment, the Chambers still has to ensure that IT supports business requirements.

It turned to Ntes, an IT provider and member of the Microsoft Most Valuable Professional (MVP) Programme. The MVP award recognises those that provide invaluable expertise and support for Microsoft products. Ntes recommended Microsoft Small Business Server 2003 as the most cost-effective solution to meet Chambers' IT needs.



“It was a relatively quick and easy process to reconfigure SBS to suit the needs of Chambers Ireland,” says Nick Whittome from Ntes. “We installed software upgrades and sat down with the office manager to show how to back-up files and receive updates for anti-virus software and patches. This is as simple as ticking boxes. We also ensured there was a solid system for backing-up all data in place to. The great benefit of SBS is that there is minimum technical support required.”

Benefits:

Access to information

Chambers Ireland utilises a series of shared files that are stored centrally and in real-time to give quick and easy access to its vast store of information.

Remote working

“At the moment we have pretty major space problems,” says Brennan. “But we now have eight employees set up to work from home with full access to the network and email. We have established well-defined user policies and procedures giving different rights to different employees regarding what information they can access.”

Increased collaboration

It is important for staff members and representatives, no matter where they are located, to be able to work on projects. SBS’s collaboration capabilities means documents and files can now be viewed, edited and shared among users.

Security and protection

Chambers Ireland may be a small company but it produces a huge amount of information. The security of this is absolutely vital.

Using the security features on SBS a strong password policy was established, while Exchange Service Pack 1 and MS Intelligent Message Filter were used to help eradicate spam. Windows Small Business Server 2003 also includes an internal firewall. This ensures that all information is fully secure.

Chambers Ireland also uses the SBS to back-up all data on its server every evening ensuring all data is secure. This involves the updating of thousands of files critical to the operation of Chambers Ireland.

Improved IT management

The ease of management of SBS has significant cost implications. This results in significant time and cost savings for Chambers Ireland because it is not paying for an on-site visit by a technician.



Mobility

Work anywhere

It's a fact of life that in today's business environment we need to be able to respond to customers as quickly and efficiently as possible. It's also a government requirement to give serious consideration to employees' requests for flexible work patterns. So how is it possible to satisfy both your customers' and your employees' demands? Through effective use of mobile technology and remote access, it is possible to be accessible to your customers, and offer your employees the ability to work flexibly.

Wouldn't it be great if you and your staff could work anywhere: at home, at the airport, in a café? Do you want to pick up your email using a Smartphone or Pocket PC any time you like?

Would you like to share your diary with your colleagues back in the office, updated with any changes you make while you are away? A server that offers remote access can help keep you and your people in touch, wherever you are.

By going mobile, there are significant additional benefits some of which are:

- **Increased productivity:** When you have uninterrupted access to information productivity is greatly increased as there is no 'dead-time' when you're unable to work
- **Customer satisfaction:** You're able to respond to customer commitments and queries out of the office as easily as when you are in the office

- **Job satisfaction:** When employees have the freedom to control where they work it can increase their satisfaction, which means a happier workforce who are more committed.

The basic requirements are relatively few and it's easier than you might think to go mobile. There are a number of devices on the market to help.

As the name suggests, a Pocket PC is a small, highly portable computer. Instead of using a keyboard, Pocket PCs recognise your handwriting and some even feature a small keyboard. Using compatible server technology, emails, calendar appointments, contact information and tasks can all be synchronised with the information you see in Microsoft Outlook2003. What's more you can even download Microsoft Word and Excel documents to read and edit anywhere.

Using a Microsoft Windows-based Smartphone you can synchronise, read and reply to your email anywhere by connecting to the server using the built-in dial-up access.

Just like a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), it also lets you access your calendar, contacts and to-do list. All this in a phone-sized package. Using a dial-in connection or a wireless network on a regular laptop, you can use your email to stay in touch while you are away from the office.



Remote access helps you stay connected using any computer with an internet connection, on a friend's PC for example, or one in an internet café. Using any web browser you can securely check your email, contacts and calendar and you can access your office computer by remote control.

How remote access works

Whatever hardware you have and however you want to connect, make sure your server has the technology built-in to make it easy.

For example, Microsoft Small Business Server 2003 can enable you to access Outlook Web Access to give you much of the rich functionality of Outlook – email, calendar, contacts and tasks – in a web browser. All you need is an internet-equipped PC and you can access your email wherever you are.

Top tips for mobile working

- 1** Mobile technology makes it easier for your staff to work flexibly in ways that allows them to do their best work
- 2** Remember to insure phones, Pocket PCs and laptops against loss or theft and back-up data stored on them
- 3** Security is important: use strong passwords and encrypt sensitive data
- 4** Respond quickly to your customers even when out of the office by accessing email remotely
- 5** Pick the right gadget for the job – sometimes a Pocket PC is a better choice than a laptop
- 6** Manage the impact of new technology on company culture
- 7** Train staff to use new technology and give them time to enhance their skills over time
- 8** Provide technical support yourself or via an IT provider
- 9** Set a good example by using the technology yourself to become more productive and efficient
- 10** Remember though, just because you can answer emails 24/7 doesn't mean you have to!



Security

Computer security checklist

1. Protect your desktops and laptops

If you are serious about security, there are three things you must do:

- 1)Keep your software up to date
- 2)Protect against viruses
- 3)Set up a firewall.

2. Keep your data safe

Implementing a regular back-up procedure is a simple way to safeguard critical business data. Setting permissions and using encryption will also help.

3. Use the internet safely

Unscrupulous websites, as well as pop-ups and animations, can be dangerous. Set rules about internet usage to protect your business and your employees.

4. Protect your network

Remote access to your network may be a business necessity, but it is also a security risk you need to closely monitor. Use strong passwords and be especially cautious about wireless networks.

5. Protect your servers

Your servers are your network's command centre. If they become compromised, your entire network is at risk. To protect your business, protect your servers.

6. Secure your line of business applications

Make sure that software critical to your business operations is fully secure around the clock.

Internal and external vulnerabilities can lead to lost productivity — or worse.

7. Manage desktops and laptops from the server

Without stringent administrative procedures in place, the security measures you take to safeguard your business may be unintentionally jeopardised by users.

Dealing with spam, viruses and phishing

Little things also add up when it comes to securing your business against computer viruses and other threats that can compromise confidential data and interrupt your ability to get your work done. If everyone does their small part it can make a big difference in how secure your organisation is.

Eleven quick tips for safe computing

1 Ensure you have the latest updates

Install updates and security patches on all servers, desktop and laptop PCs. To get the latest updates for your Windows operating system, software and hardware, go to windowsupdate.microsoft.com. It scans your computer to determine which updates you need and then you can download any or all of them. To improve the security and stability of your Microsoft Office software, go to Office Update and follow the Check for Updates link. Alternatively, you can activate the Automatic



Updates feature, which allows your PC to automatically notify you of important updates once they are made available.

2 Reduce the risk of viruses

There are numerous things you can do to protect your computer and your network against viruses. Using anti-virus software and keeping it current is the first step, but there are other things you can do: visit the Office Update site for the latest updates and patches; never open suspicious email messages or file attachments; take advantage of the state-of-the-art junk mail filter in Outlook 2003 to send suspicious messages directly to your Junk Email Folder.

3 Use Windows Security Centre to manage your settings

Get a clear picture of the security settings on your PC using the single, unified view provided in the Windows Security Centre. Adjust them as necessary to the level of protection you are comfortable with. The settings that guard your PC are automatically applied to files and content delivered via the internet, helping safeguard confidential business data.

4 Encrypt sensitive information on your laptop

If you travel on business and use a laptop that runs Windows 2000 Professional or Windows XP Professional, guard against data theft. Use the Encrypted File System (EFS) to encrypt sensitive files and folders. If the laptop is stolen, your files and folders are protected because only those with a special decryption key can access the encrypted files.

5 Download internet files from trusted sources only

If you're unsure if the files you want to download are safe, consider downloading them to a disk separate from your hard drive, such as a CD or floppy. Then you can scan the files with your virus scanner.

6 Use password encryption to protect files

Improved encryption technology has strengthened password security in Word 2003 and Excel 2003 and extends password encryption to PowerPoint 2003. Look under the Tools menu in each of these three programs to activate password protection. This is an effective way to restrict access to confidential business information.

7 Clean your hard drive before you discard a PC

If you're getting a new PC or notebook and your old one is being discarded, be sure to remove any sensitive business or personal information before you let it go. This doesn't mean simply deleting files and emptying your Recycle Bin. Your options include reformatting the hard drive or acquiring software that wipes it clean.

8 Use a firewall

If your company uses always-on broadband to connect to the internet, install a firewall as a basic line of defence against outside intruders. There are two basic types: 1) a software firewall such as the Microsoft Internet Connection Firewall that's included in Windows XP Professional protects the machine it runs on, and 2) a hardware firewall that blocks all traffic between the internet and your entire network except for traffic from senders who are specifically trusted.



9 Never surf the web from a server

As the command centre for your entire network, a server typically stores critical business information. If your server is compromised, it puts all of that data as well as your entire network at risk.

10 Avoid phishing scams

Phishing is a form of online fraud. In a typical phishing fraud, an email, supposedly from a legitimate company or financial institution, asks you to 'verify' or 're-submit' confidential information. It may gather this information by asking you to complete an online form or by return email. Trust your instincts. Ask yourself why you are being contacted or asked for this information. Never provide your personal information in response to an unsolicited email, fax, pop-up advertisement or unexpected website address. Also review credit card or bank statements for problems or inconsistencies.

11 Be smart about passwords

Always use strong passwords that are at least eight characters long and a combination of lower and upper case letters, numbers and symbols.

For more information visit www.makeitsecure.ie

Software

Ensure your software is patched

When Microsoft or another company discovers vulnerability in its software, it typically releases an update that people can download over the internet. The update 'patches' the loophole or bug

that the hackers exploited. Over time, software products have become more secure, the latest versions of Microsoft products are inherently more secure than Windows 95. But that doesn't negate the importance of downloading and installing patches as soon as they are released.

If you have a broadband connection and use a newer version of Windows you can have Windows monitor for available patches and download and install them automatically (and in the background) while you continue working.

Use 'genuine' software and avoid risks

Your software should help your employees get their work done well and get it done fast. But programs that cause your computers to freeze, that can't be upgraded, or are ineligible for technical support do just the opposite. They frustrate your employees and waste their time.

One way you can remove the headaches brought on by problem-causing programs is to avoid the use of illegal software. Illegal or 'pirated' software takes several forms. It can be software that is shared or installed on more computers than it should be. It can be counterfeit software disks. Counterfeiting is the large scale duplication and distribution of software.

Avoiding illegal software is easier said than done. The quantity of pirated software in circulation is startling. Comparing the difference between software applications installed and software applications legally shipped, a Business Software Alliance (BSA) study reports a local piracy rate in Ireland for commercial software of 38% for 2005.



Illegal software can end up on your computers through various channels. Some business owners seeing software offered at deep discounts may simply order and install it. Or an employee may install a program they purchased for their home computer, but also wants to use in the office.

Software piracy may occur when an employer or an employee:

- Installs one licensed copy of a program on multiple computers
- Copies program disks and distributes them so others can install the software
- Buys counterfeit software
- Buys a new computer on which the seller has loaded counterfeit software on the hard drive
- Has too many employees on your network using a copy of a volume licensed program.

In order to reduce piracy rates the software industry has introduced different initiatives such as product activation.

Ensure you are legal

Aside from avoiding the legal consequences of getting caught with pirated software, using genuine, properly-licensed software:

- Gives you access to documentation and warranties. Illegal software often contains little or no documentation, and no warranties leaving your company on its own to deal with a failure
- Makes technical support available
- Makes you eligible for software updates and upgrades

- Reduces exposure to software viruses. **Untested, counterfeit discs may be infected with viruses that will damage your hard drive and could cripple your entire network.**

How do you know?

If you're unsure if the Microsoft products you're running are genuine, visit the Microsoft "How to Tell" site at www.microsoft.com/howtotell. This can help you verify the authenticity of Windows, Office, Visio, business applications and developer and IT professional products.

To avoid pirated software from being installed on your computers in the future, and any liability associated with it, consider the following:

- Use caution and common sense when you buy software. Software advertised as both genuine and deeply discounted should raise your suspicion. Make sure a computer maker who pre-installs software provides you with product keys
- Purchase software and licenses from the manufacturer or authorised distributors
- Create and communicate a policy forbidding employees from loading copied or illegal software onto your workplace computers. BSA offers a sample memo to employees that you can download and customise. A sample corporate policy related to software use is also available. Visit www.bsa.org/usa/antipiracy/employers-tools.cfm for more information.



Collaboration

Improving teamwork

One way businesses are helping their employees work better together is with intranet sites.

What is an intranet?

An intranet is a private internal website that is only available to people who work at a specific company. Unlike a public website on the internet, which is available to anyone, an intranet has access control, usually relying on passwords and user names to stop unauthorised entry. Once inside, you access an intranet site just like any other website by using a web browser like Microsoft Internet Explorer. This means that it is very easy and comfortable for people to use. They are a great way to share information with staff and to communicate between team members.

Let's work together

The last thing any small business needs is inefficiency. To become and stay competitive, you need to ensure everyone is working well as a team. That means cutting out any duplication of effort, encouraging better sharing of information, and getting input from all the right people — all without wasting time.

Has this ever happened to you? You're on your way to an important client meeting, but everyone has different versions of the product brochure — or worse, the price list. If you pick the wrong version, you look stupid in front of the client, and you risk losing the deal.

So how do you ensure everyone in the company is working from the right versions of key documents? One option is to base your working around an intranet website, which is only accessible to employees within your company.

An intranet site looks and operates exactly the same as a website outside; so if you're familiar with the web, there's nothing to fear. And with the latest versions of common software, such as Word and Excel, running an intranet site becomes as easy as saving a file to your hard disk.

Intranets are no longer out of reach of the typical small business. So really, there's no excuse for people to save duplicates of the same document in different places, or using out-of-date versions.

Make a start

You can have a basic intranet site up and running in next to no time. Many small businesses are using Microsoft's SharePoint technology as the basis for a company intranet. Windows SharePoint Services, which comes free with Windows Small Business Server, gives you all you need to make a start.



Out of the box software packages, such as a SharePoint-based intranet, can give you lots of tools which you might only expect to see on very advanced websites. For example, you can make the system email you any time a document is added or changed. Or you can create a 'document workspace', which can include a discussion forum and shared lists of contacts, events and outstanding tasks.

You can also make the intranet site available — securely — over the internet. This could make the lives of your sales team much easier, letting them call up the information they need from a client's offices, their hotel room, or — with a wireless-enabled laptop or PDA — even the nearest coffee shop.

Track changes

The ability to 'track changes' to a document has been a feature of word processors like Microsoft Word for over a decade. This gives you a 'marked up' view of your document, showing the words added, changed or removed in each revision, with the name of the person who did it. It lets everyone have a say, but still allows the document owner to decide what feedback to take on board (or not).

But it's a feature you need to take care with, as several major companies and organisations have found out the hard way. If you send out a document whose changes have been tracked, your readers may be able to see its full history. This might reveal more to them than you ever intended.

You might find it easier, not to mention safer, to let your intranet handle this kind of document

management. With disk space now very cheap, you can happily store each revision of your important documents in a designated place on your intranet, with no immediate prospect of overloading your server. In the case of SharePoint, for example, this can even be done automatically — just tick the box telling SharePoint that you want to keep a full version history.

You can also extend this idea to key customers and business partners by creating what is known as an extranet site.

Benefits of extranets

You can think of an extranet site as an intranet site opened up to select outsiders. You build and manage the site, but allow your employees and important customers, clients or partners to view and interact with the information there. To ensure security, access to the site requires a valid username and password. You can also restrict which areas and files on your site others can access.

Large companies have been using extranets for years. The automotive industry uses extranet sites extensively to streamline the ordering processes and notify suppliers of parts and design changes. Suppliers in turn use the sites to receive proposals, submit bids, provide documents and even collect payments.

But you don't have to be in the car building business to operate an extranet. Small businesses have customers, suppliers and partners too. And it's not unusual for small businesses to use extranet sites when they team up with other small businesses on projects.



Customer Relationship Management

Better sales and marketing

Do you sometimes forget to follow-up on a promise to a client or prospective customer? When different employees deal with clients, does the left hand sometimes forget what the right hand has done? There are lots of software tools that simplify and co-ordinate sales and marketing.

Shared information helps teamwork

At the most basic level, you can use a shared file, like a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, to keep track of your customers and their orders. Storing this file on the server means that everybody has access to the same data and information is only entered once. It can also be accessed by remote users, which is great for letting people update it while on the road.

Using Outlook you can keep all your critical business information – diary, email, tasks and contacts – in one place, synchronise with mobile devices like Pocket PCs and access it securely over the internet from home or on the road.

If you work in sales and marketing with colleagues, you can use Outlook in combination with Microsoft Exchange Server, which is the email 'post office' built into SBS 2003, to share customer contact information, diaries and tasks.

For example, you can put information about current and prospective clients into a shared Exchange folder that is accessible to your colleagues. Whenever any of them make a change or add a new contact, everyone else has access to the new information. You can do the same thing for tasks. For example, you can use shared tasks to track orders or a shared diary to schedule follow-ups.

Knowing your customers

A Customer Relationship Management suit, such as Business Contact Manager (BCM), tracks customers and sales opportunities.

BCM comes with Office 2003 Small Business Edition. It tracks prospects, customers and sales opportunities. Each time you send an email, post a letter or make a phone call to a customer, it gets logged in the database for future reference so you can build up a complete picture of what's going on. This lets you focus your attention on the most promising prospects and your best customers helping ensure that nothing falls through the cracks.

Microsoft BCM generates reports that help you keep track of your sales pipeline, account history, neglected contacts, opportunities and most valuable customers. These results will help you direct your efforts towards the best prospects. The results can also be saved to Excel or Word for more detailed analysis.



Better sales and marketing

As servers, such as SBS 2003 can send faxes, emails and share printers, it's very easy to run sales and marketing campaigns using different forms of communication. You can fax targeted customers with a special offer, send a mail-merged introductory letter to new prospects and follow-up on existing opportunities with an email campaign. Using shared contacts in Outlook or information stored in Business Contact Manager, you can easily create personalised and targeted communications.

Tips for Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

- Have a strategy for CRM – think it through in advance
- Make sure contact details are accurate and comprehensive
- Make sure contacts are not duplicated
- Categorise your contacts: hot prospects, regular clients, slow payers, etc
- Use Business Contact Manager (within Microsoft Office) to keep track of all your interactions with clients
- If other people are going to use the system, train them
- Save time and effort by storing all your data centrally

- Pay attention to your existing customers even while you seek new ones
- Don't forget to comply with the Data Protection Act if you're storing personal information.

Microsoft CRM 3.0

The new release of Microsoft CRM 3.0 offers a new version designed for small businesses. The new Small Business Edition is designed to run on Microsoft Windows Small Business Server (SBS) and offers a full CRM suite that can be installed with just 10 clicks. It provides you with a simple wizard-driven configuration/set up of the application, and integrates tightly with SBS features such as fax management and integrated server management. If you are running Microsoft Office Outlook 2003 with Business Contact Manager, CRM 3.0 is designed to allow easy migration from your existing system. This gives important sales and marketing management functionality including reporting and analytics tools.



Doing business online

Give your website a facelift

How many times have you refreshed the graphics or content of your website? Twice? Once? Not at all?

It takes a little dated information for visitors to lose faith in your site. Plus, when an important client clicks on your “urgent” invitation to attend an upcoming seminar, only to find out the event came and went a year ago, he will feel annoyed and foolish.

Site specific suggestions

Business sites obviously are varied. But for the purposes of site facelifts, differences come down to how frequently you must make changes. Consulting services may update sites only quarterly or even annually. E-commerce sites or research companies may require updates by the hour.

Whatever your needs, you can now find appropriate and affordable off-the-shelf software and third-party service providers to do the job. You can, for instance, put a fresh look on your old site without disrupting any functionality.

Here are nine ideas culled from web marketers and developers that can modernise your site without excessive costs.

1 Reduce the number of site pages

Focus on redesigning only the core 10 to 15 pages. You can then archive any remaining popular or highly trafficked pages into Adobe PDF or Microsoft Word documents that are suitable for download.

2 Make the site a marketing tool

If you're not yet capturing data basics, such as which sites and search engines visitors are clicking from or which pages get most visitors, get started now. Use pre-packaged software or a web services provider to capture detailed information about site visitors. The first question to ask is: When visitors come to your site, what do you want them to do? Once you have answers, you can define the tracking metrics and develop the content, navigation and structure that will quickly satisfy your targeted visitors.

3 Set up an email program

Create an incentive for visitors to register or give you their email addresses. Once you have addresses, send out useful emails. But make sure you have explicit permission to do so — and don't cause more harm than good by sending email too frequently.

4 Create an online reward for prized customers

Treat your best customers with special offers or discounts. You can, of course, email such special offers.



5 Speed loading time

Fancy graphics and animations are obstacles in the path of getting to information. Make sure your visitors can easily find what they're after.

6 Invest in a content management system

Stop relying on static HTML. Instead, invest in a reliable CMS (Content Management System) which lets you update your own website content without getting a developer involved. If you update content a lot, this will pay for itself quickly.

7 Ensure visibility on search engines

Spend time and energy ensuring your site ranks high on search engines when users are using key words to find your website.

8 Add testimonials or success stories

Very few sites do this and there's no question that they add major credibility for buyers. Ask long-time customers for quotes or permission to post their case histories and their satisfaction with your services.

9 Don't be lazy

Any of these ideas will help update your online presence. But the real advice is simply not to get lazy. Pay attention to your website whenever you shift direction or significantly grow the business. All marketing and messaging must be seamless — consistent, uniform, multimedia and multi-channel.



Choosing an IT supplier

Finding the right technology partner to advise you can be hard work but it is important to get it right. A good supplier will help you make the right technology choices and get the most out of your technology.

Where do you start?

A good starting point is to ask your colleagues, suppliers and peers who they use. Also consider consulting your local Chambers. In order to help you Microsoft Ireland has a searchable database of approved partners available on www.microsoft.com/ireland.

What should you look for?

Evidence of experience is essential. You should look for someone who can help you now but also some one who can act as a long-term partner, as is able to grow and develop as you do.

Use the following questions to find the right IT partner for your company.

Do they understand your systems?

Look for evidence that they can support the hardware and software that you use now and that they have worked on similar IT kit before.

Do they understand your business?

Look for a supplier who has worked with a similar sized business and, if possible, the same industry so that you can draw on their experience and get the right IT solution for you needs.

Are they sufficiently well-qualified?

You should always check the credentials, references and the qualifications of your IT partner.

Do they talk your language?

While it is important that they understand the technology, the need to be able to communicate it to you in everyday language and justify themselves in business terms. When you ask them a question do you understand the answer? Do their proposals ring true? Do they understand the needs of your business?

Can they cope with your needs?

Do they have the resources to meet your needs now? Can they commit to a specific schedule and budget for a given project? Will they be able to do the work with their own staff or will they have to sub-contract? Will they have the resources to grow with you in the future?



What level of support will they provide?

Look for a service level agreement that sets out how quickly they will respond to problems and the level of after sales support they offer.

Ask about training?

Training on new IT systems is hugely important for you and your staff to get the most out of your system. Find out can your IT partner provide it or can they recommend a reputable company.

Are the responsibilities clear?

Can they give a clear breakdown of what they will (and will not) do? Can they explain the step by step process by which they will complete a given project? Is everyone clear on what you have to provide?

What is their fee structure?

Depending on the project, it is possible to agree a flat fee, an hourly or daily rate or an ongoing retainer. Are they willing to break down their cost structure and allocate costs to different stages or activities? You want an accurate budget before any work is commissioned.

Is there appropriate documentation?

They should supply you with a proposal for the work, including a budget, timetable and a reasonable specification. It should be in plain English. If this is satisfactory, you should have a written contract specifying all the details. Even if you do not have a formal contract drawn up by solicitors, make sure that the details of the work are written down and agreed in some form.

For more information visit www.microsoft.com/Ireland/smallbusiness.

www.chambers.ie

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