

8 Signs You Need to Upgrade Your Server

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Microsoft Small Business Center
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Your server hardware is a ticking time bomb.

Don't be alarmed. It may never actually "blow up" — which is to say, melt down and take lots of data with it. But one day, sooner or later, it will become obsolete. And for your business, that's potentially an explosive liability.

"The older hardware is, the more likely that a failure and loss of productivity will occur," warns Donald Hess, senior systems engineer at Entre Computer Services, a systems integrator based in Rochester, N.Y. "In general, a company can avoid big expenses by updating its servers every three years. If it waits five years, then there's a big risk of being compelled to upgrade many components simultaneously." Ouch.

What exactly needs upgrading?

Most small businesses tend to think of their server as a whole, which is to say hardware (the computer it runs on) and software (the application that powers the server, such as Windows Small Business Server) are one.

Talk to experts and you're likely to conclude that this holistic approach to a server is correct for most businesses. Hardware and software generally age at about the same rate. In other words, the machines need to be modernized at roughly the same interval as the server operating system is updated, give or take a few months.

So is your server ready for a once-over? Here are eight signs.

1. It crawls. "When your server gets slow, it's time for some new iron," says Alan Canton, president of the Adams-Blake Company, an information-technology consulting firm in Fair Oaks, Calif. He recommends taking a look at both disk and CPU (central processing unit) usage. "When you're at about 80%, it's time to start looking around," he advises. Slow servers, of course, mean a less productive work force. Can you afford that?

2. It sucks up your time. "If you're spending more time on dealing with server problems than you are willing to commit, it's time for an upgrade," says David Wilner, president of Rhino Imaging, a New York document imaging company. Ask yourself: If you weren't working on a particular server problem, how much money could you earn by doing something else?

3. It's noisy. "As fan drives and hard drives age, you will notice they will become noisier," says Will Luden, chief executive of Info Partners, a San Mateo, Calif., provider of outsourced IT. "This is typically a good indicator that hardware failure is just around the corner. Computers are like cars; they have only so much mileage before they start falling apart." Luden says if you can't spring for a complete upgrade when you hear funny noises, at least make sure everything is backed up.

4. It's out of warranty. "When the only people who know enough to support your server are retired and collecting Social Security, you know you have a problem," says Michael Bielski, an IT coordinator for the California Society of Enrolled Agents, a tax-professional association in Sacramento, Calif. He's not kidding. If the manufacturer has stopped supporting the hardware and software — which means it's more than three years old — then there's a good chance you need some kind of upgrade.

5. Something doesn't feel right. Maybe your hardware specifications don't match your vendor specs. "Maybe it takes longer and longer to do the same function," says Brent Kuchvalek, who manages infrastructure and security services for Optimus Solutions LLC, an IT services company based in Norcross, Ga. If you, or your IT person, have a sinking feeling about the server, chances are it could be ready for an upgrade of some kind.

6. There's no more room. "If the requirement of the software that runs on the server exceeds the servers' specifications, then you need a new server," says Kendall Tatum, manager of IT services at Frank & Company, an accounting and financial consulting services firm in McLean, Va. He says small-business users shouldn't just try to manage a space or memory crisis in the short term, but to think about the company's long-term needs. "Planning is the key," he says. "Will you be adding more staff that will need access to this machine? Will you be upgrading the software that runs on the server in the near future? These are questions that you have got to ask yourself."

7. Its performance is otherwise impaired. "Does your server seize up often?" asks Ho Lee, general manager for Chicago-based DedicatedCentral, a managed dedicated server hosting provider. "Does the box have problems resolving conflicts?" Even if things run smoothly otherwise, these occasional "hiccups" may be a sign that the server is running up against the limits of its performance. "Most businesses have a hard time tracking these issues until it's too late," Lee adds. "I recommend monitoring tools that report on the health and status of their servers. They provide information for capacity planning and alerts of trouble signs."

8. The big one happens. "There usually isn't a telltale sign that your server needs to be upgraded, in terms of hardware, until a catastrophic failure occurs," explains Robert Cashman, president of Cashman Computer Associates, an Old Lyme, Conn., IT consultancy. After a meltdown, there's normally a "scramble" to replace operating systems and applications. Frequently, those are discontinued, or support has been discontinued, and that's usually when a business discovers that it should have upgraded

long ago. "It is much calmer to upgrade in a planned manner than to scramble at the last minute to resolve a crisis," he says.

One last disclaimer: "Oftentimes," says Michael Crowe, director for IT consulting firm Plante & Moran in Chicago, "there may be no signs or warnings that are apparent to the users on the network." But the time bomb is still ticking.

Ready to upgrade?

If so, and you don't have an in-house IT staff, this may be the right time to call a consultant, says Arik Shakib, senior consultant for Imperial Integration Services, which provides IT consulting to small businesses in the Los Angeles area. "Remember to purchase a brand-name server with plenty of storage capacity for the next three years with dual processors, hardware raid, and an onsite next-day warranty for at least three years," he advises.

In fact, three years seems to be the magic number for server upgrades. Randall Palm, chief technology and IS director for CompTIA, the Computing Technology Industry Association, recommends an upgrade every three years for servers that host critical functions — as do many other server gurus. But keep the aging servers, he advises. "Older servers can be used for testing new software, or hosting functions with lower reliability requirements," he says.

Paying attention to the age and health of your server — and using a little common sense — can tell you when you need an upgrade. If your servers are mission-critical, you might also have a disaster plan in place.

"If you're prepared for the worst, updating servers is a much less risky proposition," says Shane O'Donnell, vice president for Oculan Systems, a Minneapolis network and security appliance vendor. "If you aren't prepared for the worst, Murphy's Law will take over."