



Is Your Tech Impeding Your Biz Growth?

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Every structure--whether it's a home, an office building or a bridge--needs a foundation. Without one, the structure simply can't endure or be expanded upon. The same is true in business today: Every company that relies on information access and instant communications--which means just about every small business--needs a solid network infrastructure as a foundation.

Unfortunately, many small businesses don't have a secure, consistent network foundation. In order to grow quickly, many small companies have accumulated a hodgepodge of network connection solutions, including DSL and dial-up. Their network cabling, hardware and devices (such as routers, firewalls and switches) often come from multiple vendors.

But multiple vendors and an inconsistent array of network technologies can leave your business vulnerable to security threats.

Your business can't easily make its data resources securely and widely available to users. Time, money and resources are wasted. The business isn't as nimble as it could be. Workers aren't as productive; customers aren't as satisfied.

A solid network foundation that ties all your technologies together cost-effectively supports your company's business processes, increases operational efficiencies, lowers costs, increases security and makes it possible to easily add more advanced technology as needs arise.

In this month's column, I'll explain what a network foundation is, how it benefits your small business, and how you can have one.

What Is a Network Foundation?

At a high level, a network foundation is a secure, flexible communications platform that enables your small business's many data-enabled tools and systems to work together.

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A network foundation consists of several key hardware components, with routers and switches chief among them. Switches reside in your local-area network, and routers are used to create a wide-area network.

In addition, a network foundation may include wireless access points, which allow laptops, printers and other devices such as handheld Internet Protocol (IP) phones to wirelessly connect to the network or share broadband connectivity.

And a strong network foundation includes security technology that's integrated into devices such as routers. This security provides such protections as firewall technology, which blocks unauthorized access to your network.

A network foundation may also include devices such as adaptive security appliances, which protect against network threats and provide application security, network control and containment, and secure connectivity technologies.

What Are the Benefits?

A consistent, secure, reliable network foundation can provide your small business with many benefits, including:

- **Anytime, anywhere information access.** Employees can securely access company databases from home or on the road, turning what might be "dead" time into productive time.
- **Flexibility.** A solid network foundation allows growing companies to be flexible in their future plans. It can be scaled up as a business grows and new employees are added.
- **Faster information exchange.** A single network foundation provides the opportunity to easily and securely exchange information among employees, partners and clients. Enhanced collaboration can lead to faster decision making, better customer service--and ultimately, improved profits.
- **The ability to add newer, emerging technologies.** A secure network foundation provides the platform your business needs to add voice over internet protocol (VoIP), video teleconferencing from your PC, webcasting, and other productivity-enhancing and cost-saving technologies. Your business applications can evolve from simple printer sharing to complex business-to-business data exchanges and supply-chain management using the same network infrastructure.



- **Enhanced security.** Without a common network foundation, a business may have multiple internet connections and various types of hardware devices--an environment that's extremely difficult to secure. In contrast, a single network foundation is streamlined and consistent, making it much easier to secure.
- **The ability to maintain data in a single location.** By making your databases and information resources available from one place, users throughout the company--including sales as well as accounting--have access to the same data. That helps employees provide better customer service and make more informed decisions.

What Does a Network Foundation Require?

Establishing a solid network foundation isn't necessarily inexpensive. And many small businesses are used to spending as little as possible on technology.

But as I explained in last month's column ("[Creating a Technology Roadmap](#)"), it's important for small businesses to make sure the technology they invest in today can support their needs tomorrow. Map your short- and long-term business goals to the network-enabled technologies that can help your business realize those goals. If you weigh the many competitive and financial advantages of a secure network foundation against the costs over time, you'll quickly see the return on investment.

The good news is that building a strong network foundation is getting much easier. Just a few years ago, the kind of comprehensive network foundation I described earlier would have been cost-prohibitive for small businesses. But in recent years, hardware and software prices have declined dramatically, and the small business sector has grown in size and clout. The result: Many technology vendors are now offering affordable products and services--as well as attractive leasing options--especially tailored for small business.

Financial resources are only part of the story, of course. Many small businesses lack the human resources to deploy and maintain a solid network infrastructure. Again, thanks to the growing clout of small business, many network vendors have partners and resellers that specialize in helping small businesses set up a comprehensive network foundation.

In summary, a hodgepodge of network technologies might help you in the short term. But for the long haul, your business--like anything built to last--needs a solid foundation.