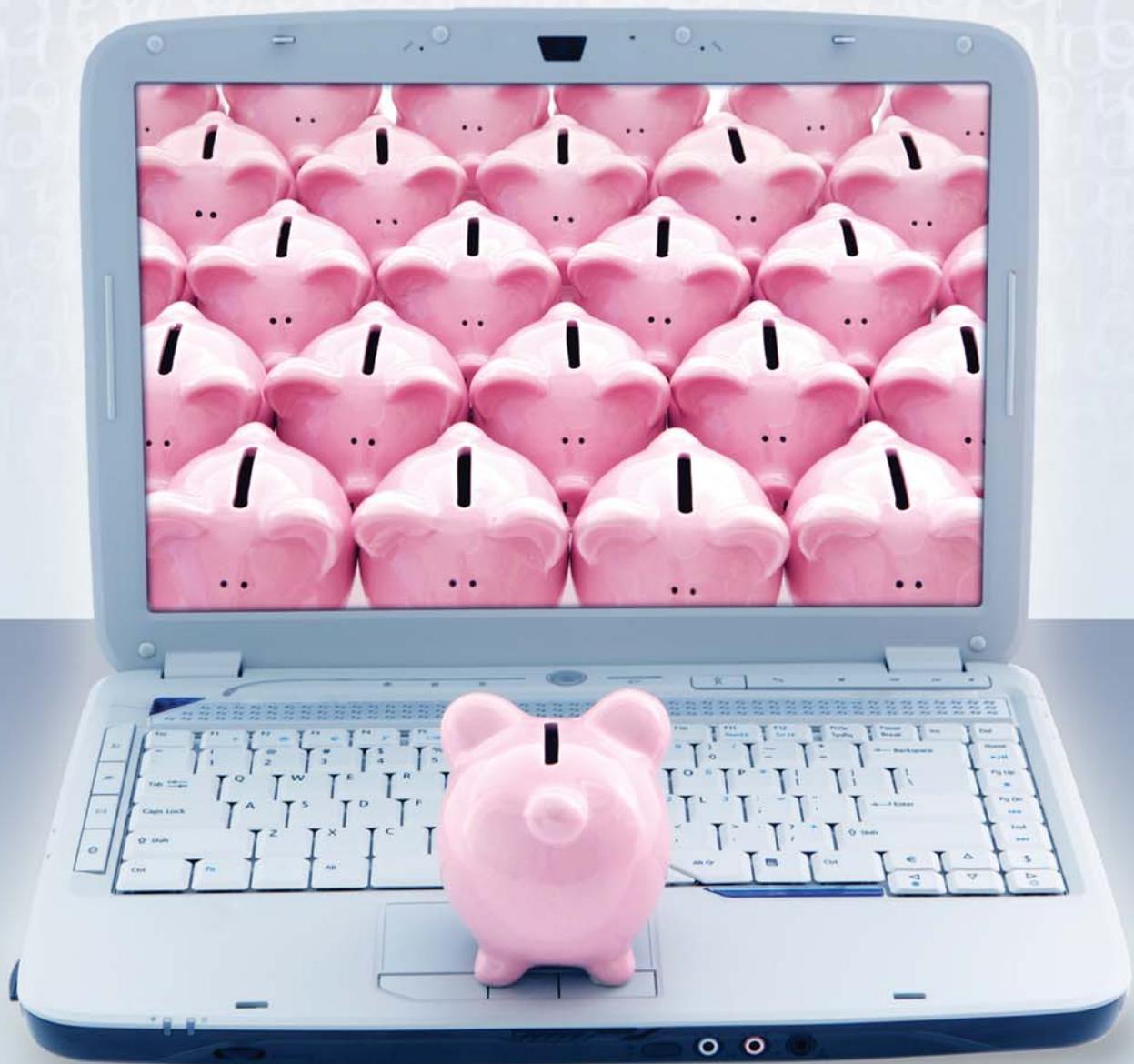


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Using Technology to Increase Productivity



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Cover Story

Using Technology to Increase Productivity

*By Jerry Fetty, President
SMART I.T. Services, Inc.*

During hard economic times as pressure mounts to cut costs, Information Technology (IT) is one of the first places agencies typically look for perceived “relief.” However, now more than ever it is critical to maximize IT’s value in your agency by getting it to produce measurable business efficiencies.

Here are some emerging technology trends, which, when implemented properly at your agency, can boost productivity and profitability, leading to an increase in your agency’s value.

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Unified Communications

One trend you have heard about for some time is VOIP (Voice Over IP), which allows you to make phone calls via your Internet connection instead of through a phone line. Though a lot of agencies have moved to VOIP phone systems, too many are not using them correctly. Using VOIP service for the phones on your desk is, in my opinion, not a good use of this technology. You simply do not get the promised benefits of VOIP's (i.e., savings) when you call your workmate in the next office. Often overlooked is the high cost associated with implementing such a technology in the office, such as updating your existing network infrastructure to accommodate the additional traffic load.

Most people do not realize that, in most cases, they will also have to run new data cables to all the desks and add switches to the network in order to do the job right. While the people selling you their voice services are often quick to show you how much money you will save on the service, when you consider the additional network enhancements that have to be made, is there really a savings? There is hope, though.

Unified Communications has been around for some time, but new

technology is breathing some new life into it. **The promise of bringing voice, video and group collaboration together has been unfulfilled until now.** But, by marrying together second-generation VOIP technologies, existing voice and video technologies, and some new software, Unified Communication is enabling agencies to communicate more effectively with their clients, prospects and employees.

One notable service/software you may be familiar with is Microsoft LiveMeeting, which allows groups of two or more people at separate locations to communicate and collaborate. Participants hear, see and interact with each other's documents and desktops if needed. The addition of a Microsoft RoundTable device with LiveMeeting takes its abilities to an even higher level. RoundTable sends a 360° video to the conference, so participants get a view of everyone seated in the room. When anyone speaks, RoundTable instantly and automatically zooms in on that person, bringing him front and center for all participants to see. LiveMeeting and RoundTable can be implemented at an agency for a very minimal cost (compared to some of the VOIP phone systems out there) and can be

made to work with existing systems.

Example: While recently away at conference, I was able to join our weekly company meeting 400 miles away. Before LiveMeeting and RoundTable I would have simply called in and joined the meeting via audio only. However, this time I was able to see everyone seated in the room. When someone spoke, RoundTable zoomed in on him or her. As I spoke, I could see one person shaking his head side-to-side. I knew instantly this person had a difference of opinion and it allowed me to deal with that issue right then. It reinforced to me something we've heard many times before: over 70 percent of communication is visual. Obviously, this technology can be used to hold meetings with customers and partners as well.

While the current price of fuel has come down a little bit, you can bet it will continue to rise in the future, so there can be a very tangible cost savings associated with using such technology in an agency. Though RoundTable is the only device I know of that for a low cost can do the 360° video with automatic zoom on speaker, there are several other unified communication solutions out there that make it well worth the time to research and consider.

What the Experts Say About Technology Investment



"If you're not continuously investing in technology to be as productive as you can be, service your customers the way they deserve and make it easy for your carriers to do business with you, you're affecting your agency's value in all of those relationships," says Shirley Lukens, senior vice president of Reagan Consulting and director of IIABA's Best Practices Study.

MarshBerry explains in their "For the Record" series that the common characteristics of the highest-valued agencies included a regimented staff and technology reinvestment programs. (MarshBerry, "For the Record", Volume I, Issue 5, May 2007).

Infrastructure Enhancements

Infrastructure enhancements can vary in scope and include everything from upgrading network hardware and components to incorporating “green,” energy-efficient materials and technology. Benefits can vary dramatically, from realizing a cost savings by utilizing energy-efficient technology to improving employee morale and job satisfaction by providing tools that make work more efficient.

Some key infrastructure enhancements that can provide a substantial Return On Investment (ROI) include the following.

Upgrading Components –

This can have a big impact on the speed of your network, which in turn can allow employees to accomplish tasks faster. Multiplied agency-wide, this time savings can result in some real cost savings. But remember, **your network is only as fast as its slowest component. In other words, if you have a brand new server and switches, but inadequate bandwidth, you can't truly unlock the potential speed and performance of your network.** The following components can contribute to increased network efficiency at your agency.

Bandwidth – Bandwidth refers to your network's capacity for transferring data over a connection. Increasing bandwidth can allow you to increase network speeds, allowing for overall efficiencies. When discussing bandwidth, it is important to keep in mind that it is impacted by various outside factors, such as network components and the size and frequency of files being transmitted across your network. For example, if your agency doesn't have a proper (Off Site) spam filtering or web monitoring solution in place, there is a good chance that spam emails and time spent at non-business-related websites are taking up a significant amount of bandwidth.

Cabling With Category 6

(Cat6) Cable – Cat6 cable supports up to one gigabit (1000 Mbps) Ethernet and other protocol networks, has more stringent standards for reducing crosstalk and system noise, and allows communication at more than twice the speed of Cat5e Ethernet cabling. This means your agency will spend less time waiting for data transfers, allowing you to utilize your bandwidth to its fullest capability. A lot of cable installers and IT people still insist that Cat5e cable is the way to go. **Do not listen to them.** Insist any new cable installed in your office is Cat6 and that all supporting components such as patch cables and other connecting pieces are Cat6 as well. Cable installers that resist using Cat6 cable because it is more expensive, do not understand that the true cost of cable is the labor to run it. **Using Cat6 cable should only add a marginal increase in the cost of an overall cable job, but double the bandwidth capacity of your network.** The cables that connect your servers to the switches should be upgraded to Cat6 cable as well to allow the core of your network to operate at top speeds.

Switches – A network switch is a device that joins multiple computers together within a local area network (LAN). It's important to note the difference between network switches and network hubs because they differ significantly. Switches, unlike hubs, are capable of inspecting data packets as they are received, resolving the source and destination of the packet, and transferring it appropriately. A switch will deliver each message to only the intended device, conserving network bandwidth, whereas a hub would transfer the message to each device connected to it. Also, most of today's switches operate at Gigabyte speed which is ten times faster than hub technology. Conserving



Tip

The Productivity and the Workplace report by the U.S. General Services Administration provides some interesting data and suggestions about improving workplace productivity. Broad in its scope, the report addresses overall investment and its return related to productivity increases.

The full report is available online at: www.gsa.gov/gsa/cm_attachments/GSA_DOCUMENT/prod_workplace_pdf_R2OD26_0Z5RDZ-i34K-pR.pdf.

Be sure to check out the Productivity Payback Model worksheet that you can use to evaluate investments at your agency.

and expanding network bandwidth means faster interfacing, transfers of files and faster customer service. Take a look at your switches/hubs. If you still have hubs in your network, replace them with switches. It is also important to make sure all of your servers are attached to a Gigabyte Switch port using Cat6.

Get Intel vPro™ Technology

Intel vPro™ Technology is a newer standard built in to the motherboards of Desktop and Portable PCs, which have the new

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Intel® Core™2 Duo Processors installed. vPro enables agencies and their IT people to manage PCs on a much lower level than ever thought possible. Technical operations such as automatic hardware inventory, remote diagnostics, and the ability to work on unbootable PCs or Servers, the ability to shut PCs down at night and to power the PCs back up, will save electricity. vPro Technology helps technical staff manage the network and increase staff productivity by allowing workstations to have maintenance performed after hours. **An agency should make sure that any new PCs being purchased has vPro Technology.**

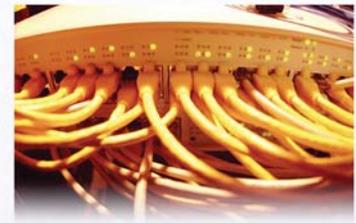
Address Non-Work-Related Web Surfing and Malware

While non-work related web surfing is a productivity killer, it also represents a security threat in the form of spyware, adware, and viruses that can harm your network. According to the SANS Institute, over 65 percent of PCs are infected with some kind of spyware,

presenting a huge threat to your business security. The vulnerability of your network to outside threats increases dramatically when employee surfing is non-work related.

So what can you do to keep your network safe and to make sure your employees are using the Internet for work-related purposes only? First, institute an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). Your AUP should indicate proper and improper uses of the Internet and should be read and signed by each employee at your agency. It should also indicate repercussions for unacceptable use. AUP's are easy to implement and templates can be found by doing a simple Internet search. One policy template that you can modify for your agency is available courtesy of SANS at www.sans.org/resources/policies/Acceptable_Use_Policy.pdf.

Second, a web defense solution should be utilized to monitor and block inappropriate websites from employee access. It will lower IT costs associated with removing spy-



Did You Know?

Every year, overall network downtime costs companies an average of 3.6 percent of their annual revenue.

ware, viruses and other malware. Employee productivity will increase because of your ability to restrict certain websites. Corporate liability and security breaches will be minimized because surfing activity will be restricted from high-risk or questionable websites that may secretly install spyware on your network. In this day and age, a proactive web defense solution is no longer "nice to have," but a "must have."

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Using a Microsoft RoundTable device with LiveMeeting allows participants at a different location to get a 360 degree view of everyone seated in the room.

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There are also new antivirus and malware threat management tools on the market today that take a much different approach to managing these threats. The antivirus detectors and malware removal tools that most agencies use today utilize "black lists." These lists contain the identifiers which the tools use to detect and remove known malware. New forms of malware, which are not in the black list yet, often get overlooked by these tools and subsequently cause problems until the manufacturer of the tool learns how to recognize the new malware and updates the tool's black list to recognize it.

The new threat management tools take the opposite approach, which is using "white lists" of approved applications and files that are allowed to run on a PC. Even if a PC has a virus installed on it, the virus is not allowed to execute and is rendered harmless. **It is amazing to see the dramatic difference in PC performance and reliability when it is operating under the protection of these new malware tools.** Stay tuned as this new way of protecting your network becomes the de-facto standard in malware defense for networks.

Proactive Network Management

With the constant changes to technology and daily development of new threats, even small networks have grown complex and require ongoing tender loving care and maintenance from highly-trained and experienced technical staff. Obviously, the cost of hiring full-time IT staff is not always feasible in today's economic climate, even for larger agencies.

Many agencies have turned to a proactive approach to managing their network, which also reduces overall IT costs and increases staff productivity. Sometimes referred to as "Managed Services," this method of support boasts many benefits over

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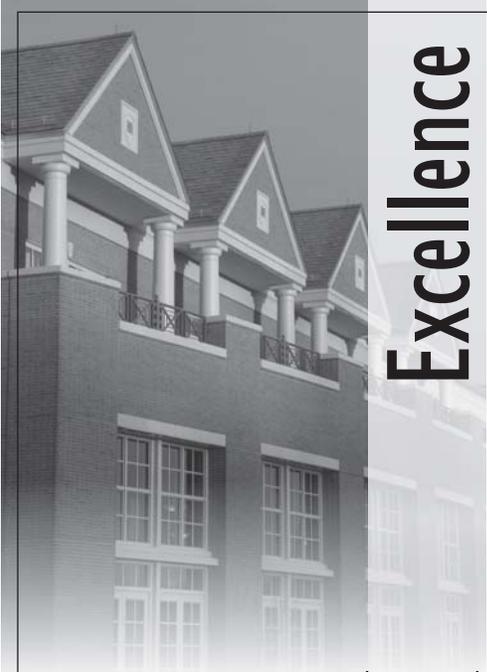
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the traditional forms of IT support.

Under managed services, networks are monitored 24/7 and potential problems are typically identified and resolved before a problem or disaster occurs. Overall IT costs are reduced because unexpected repairs, maintenance, and recovery costs are virtually eliminated. A heightened level of network security is also achieved through the administration of patches and updates, and the continuous monitoring of the firewall and security safeguards which help prevent security breaches. Productivity soars because downtime is virtually eliminated and these networks are healthier and run at optimal speed.

Agencies that use managed services to maintain their IT infrastructure realize a real competitive advantage. They are able to service customers and grow business while

others are left to deal with computer troubles. I have personally seen agencies reduce their overall IT cost up to 50 percent by utilizing a proper-managed service provider, while also gaining more time to sell and service their clients. These agencies are doing IT the smart way.

However, a word of caution! Managed services are a relatively new way of doing things and plans vary widely between providers. Be sure to scrutinize plans closely, understand which services are included, extra or just plain not offered in a plan. Look for solutions that are more proactive in nature and tailored to your industry. Look for providers who have long-standing references and credentials to prove they can deliver the promise of true managed services to your agency.

Also of utmost importance, you should look for a managed services provider that demonstrates and puts



Did You Know?

30-40 percent of employee internet browsing is non-job related? This staggering statistic was concluded from research done by International Data Corp. (IDC). In addition, their research found that 60 percent of online purchases are made during work hours.

in writing their vested interest in your agency's network when covered under their managed services agreement. Most, but not all, will charge a flat monthly fee for a majority of the service they provide. Statistics show that putting the goals and objectives of the service provider in alignment with the agency's goals and objectives is key to a productive business relationship.

For More Information

Look to my website (www.SMARTservices.com) to find out how to get a copy of my "Five ways to increase your agency's profitability" report. It will help you learn about additional technology trends along with more details on the solutions and technologies I mentioned in this article. ■



Jerry Fetty is president and founder of SMART I.T. Services, Inc. in Sterling Heights, Michigan, an endorsed MAIA

technology service provider. He can be reached at Jerry.Fetty@SmartServices.com.

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