WHITEPAPER

Keep IT Simple: A Small Business Guide

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the increasing pace of change, small- to medium-sized businesses (SMBs) sometimes struggle to keep up with market and business demands. Hot business trends, such as digital transformation and ensuring a great customer experience, often result in SMBs making technology decisions without **regard to integration and end-user acceptance concerns**.

Similarly, the SMB IT organization is faced with changing and evolving technology trends. The Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, (AI) and and cybersecurity are all technologies SMB and its IT organization could potentially take advantage of, but due to smaller budgets and team sizes, can't quite afford to explore. Compounding the situation, as SMBs evolve and become more complex, the IT organization evolves alongside, often reflecting the complexity of the business they support. How can small businesses keep IT simple in this increasingly complex world?

This paper further explores the drivers of complexity and discusses the impact of business and technology trends on the SMB IT organization. This paper also presents advice to the SMB for keeping IT as simple as possible in this increasingly complex world.

It's no secret the pace of change, from both the business and technology perspectives, is only increasing. Hardly a week goes by without some new technology being introduced into the market, enabling business opportunities but often also bringing complexity. How can a small-to-medium business (SMB) take advantage of these opportunities, yet keep IT simple in an increasingly complex world?

SMALL BUSINESS, BIG IMPACT

Do small businesses even matter? Yes! In fact, small businesses make up 99% of all firms in the U.S.[1]

While technology plays a significant role within any business, the use of technology is especially critical within a SMB. SMBs count on technology to start, run, and scale their companies. It enables SMBs to market and ship products, keep track of their finances, and interact with their customers via email, social media, or web portals. Customers use technology to find and purchase services and products, place service requests, and read business reviews.

Yet, with all this reliance on technology, most small busineses struggle with their uses of it.[2] According to a recent article in smallbiztrends.com[3], 94% of workplaces struggle with the apps and software they use. Ninety-six percent of businesses have a problem with their business processes. Many SMBs don't have a regular cycle of refreshing their hardware and software, which usually results in increasing support challenges as it ages. To be flexible and accommodating of their employees, SMBs often permit the use of employee devices to access company computing resources, but this often is a double-edged sword. The SMB has no control of the device itself, and these devices often introduce computer viruses (unbeknownst to their owners) into the SMB's computing environment. SMBs often suffer from insufficient backup and recovery options for their computing resources, as well as lack robust security policies and protocols needed to protect these resources

EMERGING BUSINESS TRENDS

Just because they aren't global entities or large national companies doesn't mean a SMB is immune to emerging business trends. In fact, these emerging business trends, if properly leveraged, enables an SMB to compete toe-to-toe with larger companies

Digital transformation can't be ignored. Digital transformation is more than just digitizing information or automating processes—it's a change to the way a business does business. It's a fundamental change in business models to exploit the use of technology. For example, many larger insurance companies are changing the way they sell automobile insurance policies, taking advantage of technology. The insurance company uses a combination of the automobile owner's smartphone along with a Bluetooth beacon placed within the vehicle to measure things like speed, braking habits, and other driving behaviors. Based on this information, the insurer offers a variety of business models, such as providing good driver discounts or "insurance by the mile"—models impossible without technology.

Another emerging business trend is around what's known as an experience. Essentially, the experience represents the quality of interactions of three groups—the customer, the user, and the employee—with an organization. The customer experience looks at how consumers interact with a business. Was the interaction frictionless? Did the consumer satisfy their needs or accomplish their objectives when interacting with the organization? Would the customer recommend the organization to others? The user experience references the use of technology to interact with a business. Did the technology facilitate a good experience? Was navigating the website or portal intuitive? Perhaps the most important experience, however, is the employee experience. Do employees have the resources and support they need to do their jobs? Do employees feel the organization truly cares about them? In any case, the use of technology plays a significant role in each experience.

[1] www.uschamber.com/dechnology-small-business

[2] www.networkdepot.com/most-common-technology-problems

[3] https://smallbiztrends.com/2019/03/small-business-technology-challenges.html

A third trend is what could be called consumer impatience. In this age of instant access, consumers demand responsiveness. Consumers have little to no tolerance for slow response times, whether in response to a question or if a transaction runs too long—from the consumer perspective. If a consumer feels an organization isn't responding as quickly as they expect, they'll simply go to another company to get their needs met.

EMERGING IT TRENDS

SMB IT organizations are faced with a changing and evolving technology landscape as well. The static nature of traditional computing environments wherein data centers were filled with computers and networking equipment have given way to cloud computing and a plethora of "-aaS" (as a service) solutions for everything from foundational computing infrastructure through applications and platform delivery. The Internet of Things (IoT) has made nearly any device able to be part of an extended, real-time data network. Leveraging IoT provides organizations the ability to collect information from those devices, as well as take actions involving those devices.

Cybersecurity and cyberthreats are issues no IT organization—much less an SMB IT organization—can ignore. Malware attacks, ransomware, denial-of-service attacks, and more are everyday cyberthreats. If your business is connected to the internet (and who isn't?), your business is at risk to cyberthreats and attacks.

Emerging AI-based technologies, like digital assistants and orchestration, can help offload those tedious and repetitive tasks faced by many SMB IT organizations, such as resetting a password or automatically executing a workflow. Effective use of these technologies free up IT people's time to do what they do best—think, innovate, and create.

The landscape of IT models and methodologies also continues to evolve. Agile continues to gain traction as the approach for developing and deploying software and applications within organizations. Concepts like "shift left"—moving work closer to the source—and "doing more with less"—accomplishing more work with less human effort—are top-of-mind for many senior leaders within organizations.

"WORK-LIFE BALANCE"

Work-life balance is a very powerful social trend across both the business and technology domains. While the phrase "work-life balance" may not be new, the meaning of the phrase has changed significantly. Simply put, work-life balance now means work fits around life, not that we fit life in around work as perhaps previously thought. What are the implications of this trend? First, people expect to have mobility in their use of technology. Whether they're using technology while traveling through airports or watching from the bleachers at their child's soccer practice, people expect to be able to access and use technology from wherever they are. People also expect to be able to do work or purchase goods or services using any device—and have a similar experience regardless of the device. In other words, people expect to be able to use their smartphones, laptop computers, or personal digital assistants to access information, goods, or services based on the use of technology and not have to be concerned about what device they're using.

People are more tech-savvy and comfortable with interacting with technology. They expect intuitive, consumer-like experiences in their interactions with and use of technology, even while at work.

The obvious conclusion—the pace of change, especially within the technology domain—shows no sign of slowing down. How can SMB IT keep up?

THE DOWNSIDE OF THESE TRENDS

But many of these trends aren't without challenges, especially for an SMB IT organization.

- **Cloud adoption –** Moving systems into the cloud often results in systems not talking to each other and critical company data literally being anywhere and everywhere. With multiple systems in the cloud, the end user has to remember multiple user ID and password combinations. Shifting critical SMB applications and data into cloud-based solutions may result in favorable OpEx vs. CapEx spend, but then increases burden and complexity of managing multiple suppliers as well as increased vulnerability to cyberthreats.
- **Emerging technologies** – A frequent tendency is for organizations, especially SMBs, to just bolt on new applications, systems, and hardware, rather than follow a strategic or holistic approach to introducing new technologies.
- **Emerging methodologies** – SMB IT organizations are challenged to find and retain qualified personnel. Furthermore, fully adopting and mastering these methodologies takes time and commitment.
- **Work-life balance** – Increased mobility increases the risk of cyberthreats. Allowing employees to bring their own devices (BYOD) means the SMB IT organization must be able to support any device from anywhere.

THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF THE SMB IT ORGANIZATION

From large enterprises to SMBs, businesses demand technology. But the SMB IT organization is faced with a unique set of challenges not necessarily found in enterprise IT organizations.

SMB IT organizations are challenged by smaller budgets and smaller teams as compared to larger organizations. SMB IT team members often play multiple roles, from system administrator to network administrator to business analyst. There's less time and money to explore emerging technologies or invest in personal skills development.

This makes hiring the right resources another challenge for the SMB. Finding qualified personnel with the right skills and knowledge is one thing. Finding qualified personnel who fit within the culture of the company brings a new level of complexity for the SMB IT.

Choosing the right technologies is a significant challenge for the SMB. Techrepublic.com called choosing the right technology the number one challenge for the SMB. SMBs are historically slow to invest in emerging technologies, such as IoT, AI, and digital assistants, because of the limited ability to invest, further compounding the issue. For example, fewer than one in five SMBs use AI within their organizations. But companies that wait five to seven years to adopt new technologies may never catch up to those companies that started earlier.

Facing these challenges, SMBs are often caught between a rock and a hard place. But making the wrong technology investments or hiring the wrong resources can be lethal to a SMB.

RESULT – INCREASING COMPLEXITY

As SMBs evolve and become more complex, their respective IT organizations have evolved right alongside, often reflecting the complexity of the business they support. Because of this complexity, SMB IT often finds itself developing interfaces between disparate data sources and applications, and administering and maintaining diverse hardware platforms, while trying to deliver good service and support business technology decisions.

Not all complexity is bad. In fact, some complexity is good or even required.

A recent simplicable.com article describes accidental vs. essential complexity. Essential complexity loses value if it's simplified. Some things must or will be complex, such as compliance with regulations or adherence to industry standards to remain competitive. Accidental complexity, which frequently occurs within SMB IT organizations, provides an opportunity to introduce simplification and add unambiguous value. The difference between accidental and essential complexity is often a judgment call.

[4] https://www.techrepublic.com/article/the-no-1-challenge-for-smb-leaders-choosing-the-right-tech/

[5] https://simplicable.com/new/accidental-complexity-vs-essential-complexity

KEEPING IT SIMPLE IN A COMPLEX WORLD

Complexity within an organization doesn't happen overnight—it's often the result of years of investments and decisions, not one specific event. Likewise, to keep IT simple will require a combination of several approaches. What can SMB IT do to keep things simple in an increasingly complex world of technology?

- **Establish an appropriate approach to governance** – Technology can do anything, but especially in a SMB, IT cannot do everything, nor can it afford to. Link technology use and strategy to overall business strategy, and define and enforce policies to help the SMB make wise technology decisions and investments.
- **Optimize processes** – Good process design is critical for keeping complex environments easy to support and administer, and opens opportunities for automation. Process effectiveness and efficiency frees up time and resources that can be used to investigate potential uses of emerging technologies. SMB IT simply doesn't have time or resources to reinvent wheels each time it's asked to perform a set of activities or is faced with familiar situations.
- **Define IT *services*, not just what IT *does*** – IT services reflect the outcomes and value delivered or enabled by IT. Defining IT services in this manner helps SMB colleagues understand the organization's technology capabilities and how technology enables or supports business results.
- **Invest in support tools** – Find and implement administration and support tools to manage multiple systems, ideally from a single pane of glass.
- **Standardization** – Standardization on hardware, software, and applications helps SMB IT get better at those specific technologies, rather than attempting to support a larger and more diverse number of technologies hardware, applications, and productivity tools.
- **Leverage external expertise** – Focus SMB IT on core business processes and support, and bring in external partners to manage or implement aspects requiring highly specialized skills and knowledge, such as cybersecurity or methodology adoption. SMB IT organizations must develop, nurture, and maintain strong relationships with competent suppliers to augment staff and address areas in need of deep expertise.

By removing or masking complexity, SMB IT can spend more time with business colleagues understanding how they would like to use technology, and helping leaders make informed decisions about technology investments. SMB IT gets the time it needs to understand emerging technology solutions and how they might be applied within the SMB.

Conclusion

With the increasing pace of change, SMBs can be particularly vulnerable to adding needless complexity to their organizations, especially in the face of emerging business and technology trends. SMBs, like any other business, must respond to market demands, but can fall into traps such as adding technology without giving any thought to how to integrate it into the existing environment. As a result, working with IT and technology becomes more complex. Smart moves, such as hardware and software standardization, establishing an appropriate level of governance, and optimizing processes can help keep IT as simple as possible in an increasingly complex world.

SolarWinds offers an array of simple, affordable, and reliable tools to help cut the through the clutter and support small business as they navigate IT trends, whether you're looking for affordable cloud solutions or want to use on-premises software. Here are a few options to explore.

» ipMonitor® – Centralized monitoring to track the essential up/down and performance monitoring for networks, servers, and applications

» Dameware® Remote Support Solutions – Whether you need a cloud based solution or require an on-premises version, try Dameware

» Help Desk Solutions – From a simple Help Desk to a full ITIL Suite, we have the ITSM solutions that fit your needs

» Patch Manager – Patch management software designed to quickly address software vulnerabilities

ABOUT SOLARWINDS

SolarWinds (NYSE:SWI) is a leading provider of powerful and affordable IT infrastructure management software. Our products give organizations worldwide, regardless of type, size, or IT infrastructure complexity, the power to monitor and manage the performance of their IT environments, whether on-prem, in the cloud, or in hybrid models. We continuously engage with all types of technology professionals—IT operations professionals, DevOps professionals, and managed service providers (MSPs)—to understand the challenges they face maintaining high-performing and highly available IT infrastructures. The insights we gain from engaging with them, in places like our THWACK® online community, allow us to build products that solve well-understood IT management challenges in ways that technology professionals want them solved. This focus on the user and commitment to excellence in end-to-end hybrid IT performance management has established SolarWinds as a worldwide leader in network management software and MSP solutions. Learn more today at www.solarwinds.com.

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