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SMALL BUSINESS MATTERS

Getting tech help avoids headaches

By Jennifer Heldt Powell

My old e-mail provider had a frightening, extended period of downtime, so I thought I was solving a problem when I switched to a new provider. But the change has caused its own problems. I'm now stuck using two separate programs to read e-mail on my laptop and cell phone, which has disrupted my carefully designed electronic e-mail filing system.

Information technology is one of the biggest challenges a small business faces these days. It allows us to do more and look more professional than ever before, but most of us are on our own without an expert.

A colleague of mine has a brand-new laptop sitting in a box because he simply doesn't have the time to transfer over the files from his old one.

Ernie Gates, owner of Gates Healthcare Associates Inc., provides business advice to health-care companies making millions of dollars, but when it came time to set up a network for his home office, the consultant hired a consultant.

It's easy to overlook the need to budget time and money for technology, but doing so can be detrimental to a business. The right technology can make every day a little bit easier, while the wrong technology can cause major headaches.

"Every company needs to decide what they want from their technology so as to spend their money effectively," said Jack Calkins, a business adviser with SCORE.

The approach will vary depending on whether a company is going to use technology to get new customers or just run the business more efficiently.

At first, it may be possible for the business owner to go it alone. A laptop and a phone line may be sufficient, but even then you should factor in how much time it will take to get things running. Something as simple as setting up a business phone can take several days and may include some downtime. (This information comes from personal experience.) So when is it time to bring in a professional?

Business owners "need to clarify what they would like from IT and rank the different desires on their wish list," Calkins advised.

As with everything else in business, you weigh the cost against the value, said Gates, who has run several companies. This time, he figured a pro could do it faster and would know more about what is available.

"There's no way that a person like myself would know what's available because it changes so rapidly," he said.

It is like bringing in a mechanic to work on your car's engine even if you change your own oil, said Steve Wojcik, senior partner of Prosper-IT. The company manages computer systems for small to midsize businesses. That includes setting up the systems and then upgrading them as new technology becomes available.

"It comes down to this: Do you want to spend time running your business or running your IT service?" Wojcik said.

If you decide to get help, you will need to figure out how much you need. You can hire someone just to fix a problem or set up a new system. That's the cheapest upfront, but does not provide long-term support. A company like Prosper-IT that maintains and upgrades over the long run will likely cost more but can prevent problems like lost service or viruses.

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