

Using Technology in Small Business

In December 2006 I wrote an article concerning technology now available to small businesses. We now have so many wonderful applications that have transformed our lives, and the way we go about our business.

Who knows where the future will take us?

Sometimes the new technologies are not major, but their impact certainly can be significant. One thinks of appraisers and surveyors, and their instruments that use light beams to measure distance.

Or think of the real estate field, where so many technology uses abound, such as websites, electronic keys, online lookups of property for tax values, tax liens, and other information.

Building inspectors can document variances in building codes with cell phone cameras, graphic artists can copy logos and other information, and so on.

In my own field, I just received notice today that IRS may be forced to delay processing paper-filed returns (as opposed to e-filed returns), due to anticipated difficulties with the latest round of tax legislation.

IRS is clearly saying they don't want your paper returns, and they don't want to hand-key all that information.

Here are a few technologies we have implemented in our own business, and some thoughts on their value and the pitfalls of using them.

Dual Monitors

All our workstations now have two flat screen monitors. The limitations of desktop workspace pretty much dictate that we use flat screens, rather than the older CRT monitors.

Dual monitors also mean installing another video card and some special software. More RAM (memory) and faster processing speed are requirements as well. And unless you are technically more adept than I, you've got to pay someone knowledgeable to install these things and get them operating properly.

So you've got some additional capital investment when you're equipping multiple workstations.

But the productivity gains are often well worth the investment.

In our world, we can look at this year's tax return as well as last year's tax return at the same time without shuffling any paper.

There are many analogs. Attorneys can write a legal brief on one screen, with the appropriate statute displayed on another screen. Commercial bankers can compare loan documents to credit histories, and so on.

I know of several people who have moved to triple monitors, but that seems like overkill somehow.

File Servers and the Paperless Office

Frankly, I don't know how our office of 4 to 5 people could function without a central file server.

We don't have a File Room, nor do we have file cabinets. All of our documents, records, calendars, and everything else comes from one computer.

So we never need to get up and pull a tax return, supporting documentation, or anything else from a physical location. It's all available from our workstation with just a couple of clicks.

We never have to worry about whether someone else has pulled that file, or whether the documents have been misfiled in the wrong folder.

Frankly, I can't imagine working any other way.

But you can't just install a file server and count the money savings. You'll need a fairly strong computer with a specially designed operating system. Our operating system cost \$800, which is the price of some computers!

And of course, you've got to pay that person who is technically more adept to install the operating system, and to drop by from time to time to make sure everything continues to work.

Remote Desktop Processing

We're using this technology more and more. We have a CPA on staff that telecommutes daily during tax season, but rarely comes by the office. She doesn't need to. We can all the tax supporting documents, which are of course available at any time.

The various worksheets and analyses, and of course the working copy of the tax return are all available to her and to us.

Remote Processing is perfect for bad weather and sick children, too. All of us have stayed home for various reasons, and have been able to work pretty much uninterrupted. After all, we're all using our work computers; we're just sitting at home while we're using them!

The Multiplier Effect

You really start to see the benefit of all this when one technology feeds and reinforces the other.

The combination of the file server, the paperless office, and remote desktop technology produce multiple benefits that allow us to do the same thing in new ways, and to do them more efficiently.

Consider incorporating some of these technologies in your business in 2008.