

Server Infrastructure

The Secret Weapon for Small and Midsize Businesses

By Michael Roney

Is your server infrastructure up to date? Or has it atrophied? If you agree with the latter, you could be missing out on real productivity, efficiency and competitive advantages in your small or midsize business (SMB).

As the technology that runs your e-mail, scans for viruses to protect your network from attack and allows your employees to work together and access key data from remote locations, server infrastructure is indeed your secret weapon — the key to your survival and success in today's tough economic climate, when even making payroll can be a challenge.

So while there's no doubt that your IT purchases must more than ever be especially deliberate, an informed investment in a cost-efficient and powerful server infrastructure amounts to a business imperative you cannot afford to ignore — one that will determine whether you have the critical technology tools to grow and prosper.

The Heart of Competitiveness

International Data Corporation (IDC) reports there are roughly 35 million SMBs worldwide, with a huge number reporting that network infrastructure technologies are at the heart of their ability to be competitive. In fact, these businesses have discovered that updating their network infrastructure to allow employees, vendors and customers to access the network remotely increases their productivity and profitability dramatically. For example:

- A golf course in Nevada has been able to automate paper-bound processes, improve customer service, reduce time spent on technology issues, work remotely and increase revenues by operating more efficiently.
- A small company in Canada improved health-care delivery by simplifying remote access to patient information and backing up critical files, allowing medical staff to more easily share files, set up meetings and locate data — all with tighter network security.
- A bank in Germany reduced IT staff work by approximately 20% and increased remote-worker productivity while reducing costs across the board.

Making the Right Investment

Now that you understand how server infrastructure can add value, how do you go about making the right investment? It begins with selecting a server that is not only affordable and simple to install, operate and maintain, but will also start recouping its costs immediately. Ensuring the best outcome from your evaluation process requires close attention to features and resulting business benefits that will directly feed your productivity, profitability and success.

An SMB network capable of growing the company while returning good ROI should be designed to work with existing technology, build on standard best practices and be able to deliver a comprehensive network at an affordable price. It should also offer the following:

- The essential technology needed for a secure and reliable integrated IT infrastructure
- The latest versions of management, messaging and security server technologies
- The applications used by larger companies, such as e-mail, Internet connectivity, internal Web sites, remote access, support for mobile devices, file and printer sharing, backup and data-restore capabilities
- Highly secure access to business contacts, calendars, e-mail, files and other important desktop resources from any Internet-connected computer, allowing your employees to be productive while they're away from the office or on the road
- Web-based customer service and marketing applications to extend your company's geographic reach and help bring in new customers
- Protection of your vital business information with network data backup that enables you to recover accidentally deleted files
- One affordable price

Your Five Key Must-Haves

While the path to increased profitability is clear, it's taking that first step — making the initial investment — that can be daunting. Evaluating server infrastructure in terms of business investment admittedly can be a tough thing to get your head around, so be thoughtful in your selection. To assure that you make the right choice, you've ultimately got to evaluate any server infrastructure in light of five key must-haves:



Must-Have #1: Power

At its heart, the promise of server infrastructure ROI and business success is centered around the power and flexibility of your server infrastructure, including the productivity tools it allows you to bring to bear on your business needs. The best platform should feature industry-standard applications within an architecture that allows you to improve your day-to-day efficiency with a central repository for storing and sharing information.

Before investing, make sure that your solution is designed in a way that allows your employees to perform more revenue-producing tasks. Sharing resources and equipment, such as Internet access, printers and fax machines, is an effective way to get the most value from your server infrastructure investment, but you can take your productivity to another level entirely through seamless workflow and collaboration. The best platform will allow employees to find and share documents easily, collaborate on projects and automate many routine tasks.

A robust customer response capability is also central to business growth and ROI, and that is a benefit that you cannot afford to underestimate. Your customers are your lifeblood, and your ability to respond to them more quickly and dynamically will go right to your bottom line.

Must-Have #2: Mobility

You'll gain even more if your server infrastructure platform allows your employees to do business securely from wherever they happen to be — at home or on the road — with anytime, anywhere access to your business desktop, including e-mail, files, business applications and more.

Your platform should allow you to connect with customers, vendors and suppliers seamlessly. It should offer access to contacts, appointments and files from any Internet-connected computer or smartphone so you can be responsive even when you're away from the office.

Distributing essential information to those who can best use it at your business's outward points of action — whether sales, decision support or manufacturing — will provide your employees with new ways of relating to their customers and one another, creating cost savings, better service and enhanced competitive strength.

The same mobility features will also enable you to create a bigger business presence with online marketing tools, differentiating your business while presenting a more professional image to your customers.

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Must-Have #3: Security

Security is critical in fully delivering enhanced value to your operation. As data becomes more mobile and fluid, it is also more challenging to secure and synchronize it across the network and mobile devices. Worldwide connectivity over the Internet and through private networks means that even in an SMB, the requirements for securing your business intelligence are essentially the same as those for larger firms. In essence, this means ensuring that your users have access to the information they need, protecting company assets while managing risk and delivering strong data protection.

Look for the industry's strongest anti-virus and anti-spam protection to help safeguard your information from malicious attacks, viruses and spam. Also demand the kind of multitiered or layered protection that will ensure your system stays up and running, safe from outside threats. Specifics to look for include:

- In-depth multiple-level security features with integrated security workloads that are preconfigured and optimized to help deliver protection from common threats
- Centralized security feature management with a consolidated view of security state across systems, integrating both native and third-party applications
- Automated patching and update processes that make it easier to keep your system online

Must-Have #4: Simplicity

Power and protection are essential, but achieving server infrastructure platform ROI while building your business becomes much easier when you're dealing with less complexity and have more control. These attributes not only increase predictability and reliability, but also reduce the typical errors that can occur when stand-alone products are deployed.

Effective simplicity begins with setup. Implementation of your server solution needs to be simple from the get-go, allowing you to not only capitalize on the labor efficiencies provided by your in-house expert or outside provider, but also benefit sooner from the advantages that the new tools will bring to your company. You'll be ahead of the game if your server solution includes workloads optimized out of the box for enhanced security, performance and reliability. This allows you and your technology partner to reduce setup time from days to hours, with significant cost savings. It will also allow you to instantly and economically create more an efficient business environment as demanded by your unique customer needs and changing conditions.

Simplicity also means making sure that once you are up and running, you will be able to simplify your IT administration through a single point of access to your environment and then easily manage your environment through reduced complexity and automated tasks. The right kind of reporting system is essential.

You'll therefore maximize ROI with a system that offers one central point of administration — an easy-to-use, accessible control panel — with simple daily and weekly reports on the health and security of your technology.

Must-Have #5: Elegance

Elegance is reflected in a solution that is highly effective and simple, with the capability of solving multiple problems at once. In the world of server technology, elegance is all about the high functionality and deep power that comes with an integrated architecture featuring popular and robust industry-standard applications — one that uses the same standards and technologies as the world's leading companies, but with an economy and simplicity in line with your P&L.

Small and midsize organizations frequently rely on consultants to build and manage their IT, so any solution should be designed with both partners in mind, providing a consistent platform that helps reduce deployment costs while developing stronger, mutually beneficial relationships.

When considering the product attributes that represent an elegance that will work for you, look for the following:

- Industry-standard, integrated user applications that will seamlessly talk to one another, as well as to your vendors, employees and customers
- Simple, automated administrative tools that will help you proactively manage your IT environment while you save time and money
- A centralized administration console that allows proactive management of your IT environment from a single location
- Single-server and client-access licenses for all included products to simplify licensing for you and your users
- Integrated plug-in capability that will allow you to easily view, deploy, manage and administer your third-party applications from one starting point

Compatibility and scalability are additional elegance factors that will boost your ROI. As you grow and your business needs evolve, you will need a server platform that can change with you, allowing you to easily add users, servers and applications or expand into other technologies. You will also need a system that assures your computers, servers and applications are current and your network healthy and up-to-date. That's true elegance.

Higher Profits, Speedy ROI

Stay true to these considerations and you'll select the optimal solution for your SMB: one that will unleash improved productivity through reductions in task work and increased output. You'll then have the time to focus on core business issues, rather than on disruptions caused by IT failures or security breaches, all while enjoying the savings that stem from using an integrated suite of applications.

You'll grow your customer base and revenue with increased productivity, lower costs, higher profits and ROI that can be counted in months rather than years. From top to bottom, you'll find that your new server infrastructure has become your secret weapon for success.

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