

The 21st Century Workplace: an office that loves your lifestyle

Most people start their own business because they want to be their own boss, and then discover how hard a taskmaster they can be on themselves!

According to a study for insurance company Hiscox, the average small business owner already works more than 50 hours a week. As times get tougher, the temptation is to cut costs by doing even more yourself, resulting in a fossilised social life and children who mutter "who's that?" on the rare occasions they glimpse you around the house.

It doesn't have to be like that. Today's technology offers a multitude of ways to reduce your operating costs while improving your quality of life. Many of these solutions are free, refreshingly cheap, or already sitting unused somewhere in your computer system. They are also simple to set up, easy to learn and use, and will deliver genuine benefits from day one. If the modern office is a 24-hour-a-day lifestyle, you might as well work from the comfort of your home.

Travel: 'staying in' is the new 'going out'

For the past five years, telecommunications giant BT has saved over £100m per annum by replacing travel with technology. That's because travel costs soon mount up: think not only of the tickets and mileage but also subsistence, hotels and all that unproductive travel time.

We can't promise you £100m in your pocket, but conduct the same meetings using telephone, PC and online technologies, and you'll still save a fortune. These solutions are not only economical, but add up to a much more satisfying experience than a traditional conference call. In fact, despite being miles apart, you and your meeting colleagues can collaborate in ways which can even beat the traditional 'meeting room and projector' set-up.

Imagine, for example:

- You invite everyone directly from Microsoft® Office Outlook – as easily as sending an e-mail
- You share slides with everyone, direct to their desktops, as you speak
- You can see everyone's reactions, thanks to shared video and audio
- Throughout, you share a whiteboard to jot down extra notes – which everyone receives in their e-mail afterwards
- And you can even share your own desktop and applications for running live demonstrations

Microsoft Live Meeting enables you to achieve all this. You don't even have to buy the software since you can rent it as a service, either pay-as-you-go or with a monthly contract. It's economical, environmentally friendly, and still highly personal.

"Until quite recently technology like this was the preserve of large corporations, but now small firms can realise the same benefits and for a fraction of the cost," says Robert Epstein, Microsoft's head of SMB Marketing. "The ability to rent rather than buy makes it especially attractive, as there are no up-front capital costs and the technology can start working for you straightaway."

When everywhere's your office, you can't lose documents

Not travelling to meetings is one thing, but what about all those times when staff have to struggle into the office to pick up an important e-mail, or stay late to finish a piece of work? Almost everybody now has a mobile phone and a laptop or home PC; so wouldn't it be easier to access information from there?

Hundreds of thousands of small firms already use Microsoft Small Business Server, which makes it easy for users to pick up e-mail, documents and software on their office network from anywhere on the Internet – including at home or on the road. You can even have your business e-mails, appointments etc. automatically forwarded to a Windows Mobile® Smartphone so you and your staff are never out of touch. (This costs nothing more than your mobile operator's standard data rates, and these fully-featured phones come free with many business phone contracts.) This flexibility is helping small firms to look after their customers, respond to opportunities and keep the 'Open' sign in the window without having to be there every hour of the day.

Even the smallest firms with only a handful of users can still get remote access to e-mail and documents, just by joining [Microsoft Office Live](#). Office Live is a free service that makes it easy to set up your own company Web site, to share documents and to manage workspaces with colleagues, customers and partners.

If you like to work on more than one computer – office PC, home PC etc. – you'll know that a magical law decrees that the document you want to work on is always on the 'other' machine. To save you tearing your hair out and messing about with memory sticks, Microsoft is developing a technology called Live Mesh, which automatically synchronises selected folders across all your computers, so you've always got the latest version of your key documents. They'll also be securely stored on the Web, too, so you'll be able to access them from any online PC. You can try the Beta version of Live Mesh right now at www.mesh.com

Squeeze more out of your staff – set them free!

The ability to work flexibly wherever and whenever it suits you has obvious benefits for the business owner. But what about your staff? How will you know they're working if they're not at their desks from nine to five?

The short answer is that you won't. You'll have to trust them. But if you get into the habit of managing by 'output' rather than 'input' – i.e. looking at how much people achieve not how long they spend doing it – you'll soon know who's pulling their weight and who isn't. And study after study has shown that most employees regard flexible working as a privilege that they don't want to abuse, and that it makes them more efficient. For example, a study by Coventry University Business School found that, in an eight-hour day at the office, people only managed five hours productive work, but they did eight hours work in the same time at home.

"If workers have the freedom to explore different ways of working, they'll be less stressed, more effective and more productive," says Tom Stewart from System Concepts, an international expert on people and technology. "Giving people more choice is empowering, raises morale and improves the relationship between employees and their bosses."

Research conducted for Microsoft found that for nearly three-quarters of people, flexible working is a deciding factor when choosing a new job. Firms that adopt flexible working can tap into new pools of skilled labour, including parents who need to organise their day around child care, or those who just hate rush-hour commuting.

When much of the UK was paralysed by snow on 3 February 2009 and a fifth of workers stayed at home, the Federation of Small Businesses estimated the cost to the UK economy at a staggering £1.2bn. Staff who worked from home however, accessing their business files and e-mail, and using tools like Live Meeting and Mesh were able to continue more or less as normal!

Save money, buy back your lifestyle

Technology can also save your business money. Something as simple as using the Internet for telephone calls, via technologies like Windows Live™ Messenger, can bring big financial savings. "My computer is my telephone," says Microsoft's Epstein. "I have a single phone number that follows me around wherever I have an Internet connection." Never missing an important deal, Epstein can be contacted anytime, anywhere and on one number.

Plus, with staff working part of the time at home or on the road, you may not need to provide everyone with an office desk. Minority Supplier Development UK, a five-person non-profit organisation based in Leicester, has two staff who telecommute from their homes in London using Microsoft technologies. "If we were to have an office in London we'd look for managed office space, which can cost £20,000 a year," says Mayank Shah, one of the firm's directors. "With this solution we simply don't have to spend that money."

Perhaps most importantly, if you're one of those owner-managers working 12-hour days, flexible working will give you back your life.

So what's in it for me?

Thanks to smart technology, the 21st Century business is agile, responsive to clients, open day and night, and operates from as low a cost base as possible:

- **Minimise your IT costs**

Hosted services give you the best IT services, fully supported, for a predictable and manageable fixed monthly fee. With everything from CRM to Live Meeting available as a hosted service, you can cut travel and facilities costs to rock-bottom.

- **Stay connected**

With Mesh, Office Live and Windows Mobile services, your office can follow you around. Now there's no excuse for missing a crucial e-mail, leaving that document in the office, losing files or leaving a customer waiting for a reply.

- **Talk your customers' language**

At very low cost, you can now be there for your customers, however they want to talk to you: think e-mail, instant messaging, video and Web conferencing or good old-fashioned phone.

- **Share the good news**

Thanks to a range of collaborative tools, you can work more effectively with employees, suppliers and customers – whilst staying safe and secure. Use Live Meeting to set up conferencing in seconds, and Mesh, Office Live or Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server for powerful document sharing.

- **Do what you do best**

Microsoft's network of partners and service providers will keep your technology running – leaving you to get on with growing a successful business.

A case study:

Mike Bryett, CEO of Bryett Enterprise Ltd is a Microsoft Small Business Specialist – he's trained to help even the smallest companies buy the right technologies to grow their businesses and then keep it all working, whatever the situation. Plus, as a small business owner himself, he knows exactly the challenges faced by other new and growing companies. Here he explains his prescription for the 'Anywhere Office'.

First of all, not surprisingly, keeping costs down is paramount for small businesses today. They see the value of collaboration, but they rightly want the best value they can get, and without new or unplanned support costs. That's why the new Office Live Services and Mesh are proving so popular – as hosted solutions they're highly economical. Mesh is brand new, and only available on a Beta basis, but we've already got several clients actively using Mesh with some great results.

The main challenges we try to resolve with these tools come down to accessing applications, retrieving files, and sharing documents. Interestingly, lots of our clients are already familiar with individual online services for this sort of thing, but experience has taught them that they come with disadvantages too. Individual file transfer tools are fine, but then you end up with different versions of documents scattered around home and work computers. Similarly, there are free conferencing services available, but they offer quite an unsatisfying experience – which rather ruins the point of using them in the first place. Given the low incremental costs and the reliability and quality of service that comes with a supplier like Microsoft, customers soon see the value of Live Meeting and the Online Services suite.

It's also worth mentioning that all these collaborative tools are easy to set up and represent very little change to the sort of IT which most small businesses already have – even to the point that they can be set up in the middle of a crisis. During the recent snow problems, we were deluged with clients saying that they were stuck at home. Microsoft's Small Business Server, the core technology for small businesses, includes remote access functionality as standard. Not only that, as our clients' support company, we were able to switch these functions on remotely, too. We had many of our clients working happily from home within fifteen minutes of their initial call.

Not surprisingly, those are exactly the clients now looking to make the most of remote working, and equip all their staff with file sharing, home access and remote meeting tools.

Perhaps the final piece of the jigsaw is the old-fashioned telephone call. We're taking work out of the office by replacing traditional telephony with VoIP; which allows each user to offer a full 'in the office' experience wherever they may happen to be. One of our clients is based in Windsor, with sales staff as far afield as Aberdeen and Grenada. Thanks to VoIP, calls always go through to the right person, even if that person is actually in the Caribbean. It's just one more way in which smart technology gives clients the freedom to travel without sacrificing professionalism and customer service."

Work smarter, not harder: top tips for the 21st Century office

Here are Mike's top tips for using technology to give yourself the freedom to work anytime, anywhere.

1) Go home – now!

You can't work every hour of every day. Yet to compete with larger companies, you might think you've got no choice. With Microsoft Office Live, Mesh and Online Services, you can work as effectively from home as in the office.

2) Everyone can benefit

Your staff will always (quite rightly) be your greatest expense. Computing power is consistently reducing in price, and it now makes perfect sense to increase their productivity by equipping them with the tools they need to work anytime, anywhere. Forget any worries you may have about employees shirking their responsibilities – all the evidence suggests that staff with freedom are hard working, loyal and happier.

3) Travel less

Sometimes there's no substitute for face-to-face meetings, but there's also no point in spending four hours on the road for a one hour meeting. Microsoft Live Meeting saves you time without sacrificing the 'personal touch'. With Webcam support and file-sharing, remote meetings can be as rich an experience as being there, all without the misery of your local train company's sandwiches.

4) Rediscover your mobile phone

Setting up office services on your phone has never been easier – especially if you ask for a phone with the Windows Mobile 6 operating system. Data tariffs are plummeting in price, and you can now enjoy high-speed e-mail, Windows Live Messenger, Internet browsing and document editing with the same sort of experience you're used to at your desktop. If you need a larger screen, snap up one of the new generation of lightweight palmtop PCs: they're economical, fast and a doddle to use.

5) Modern technology comes with modern financing

Don't forget that an increasing number of Microsoft software and services (like the Microsoft Online Services suite) are available for a fixed monthly fee – just like your mobile phone. That means you get the latest online tools with no upfront capital purchases, no maintenance costs and totally predictable outgoings.

Resources

For more information on Business Contact Manager visit
www.microsoft.com/uk/bcminfo

For more information on Small Business Server 2008 visit
www.microsoft.com/uk/sbs2008

For our Small Business Centre visit
www.microsoft.com/uk/smallbusiness

For more information on Office Live visit
www.microsoft.com/uk/officelive

To learn more about Business Productivity Online Services visit
www.microsoft.com/online

To learn more about our Small Business Specialist Community visit
www.microsoft.com/uk/sbsc