

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Going High-Tech

When it comes to keeping up with technology for the home-based business, most advisors don't have the time to research the latest and greatest. From going wireless to protecting your data, **Shane Schick** shows you how to organize your business with these six steps to a tech-savvy home office

When Tino Breلاك decided to set up his home-based mortgage consulting business in Toronto less than a year ago, he started with a BlackBerry, a desktop and a business phone line. So far, so good.

"Down the road, I'll probably need to get a better desktop for home use," Breلاك says, adding that a multi-function fax/scanner/printer brought his total IT investment to about \$2,500. "What I'm doing doesn't require the most sophisticated equipment. I just need something reliable."

Breلاك is an example of a financial advisor who is exploring technology to improve his productivity and efficiency. His BlackBerry now includes four different e-mail accounts, for instance, and he has learned to have his calls forwarded directly to the device so he is always accessible. For some home-office users, that's enough. For others, there's the potential to do a lot more — and to save a lot of technical headaches.

Step 1

Get organized with Web 2.0

The old model in corporate environments, which still exists today, involves buying expensive software licences for programs that are then distributed to employees across the organization. Until recently, the home-office version of this approach was to buy a scaled-down version of business software from your local retailer. But that didn't provide you with anywhere near the same level of support or features. Web 2.0 has changed that.

Although most of us are still getting used to the "1.0" version, Web 2.0 merely refers to a way of accessing software over the Internet instead of buying it and often using it through your web browser rather than downloading it onto your computer. The pricing models vary, but usually involve a subscription fee for monthly access to services. If you only use the basic features, the services might be very cheap or even free. For more advanced features — and better security or more storage — you might have to pay more. The result still might be less expensive than buying a program from your local Future Shop.

A good example of Web 2.0 that might be useful to financial advisors is FreshBooks.com, a made-in-Canada product that allows users to handle invoicing and time-tracking chores. The most expensive version costs \$149 a month, but the most basic version is free and the month-to-month setup means there's no contract. The product was designed with freelancers in mind and will automate sending invoices by surface mail, generate reports on how much time you've spent on each client and even accept payments online.

There are lots of other Web 2.0 applications that can be used for managing priorities and projects. The best online source to find and evaluate them is WebWorkerDaily.com, which lists dozens of them every week with comparisons and commentary.

Step 2

Choose hardware that works the way you want

Personal computers are great for users who sit at their desks for long periods and notebooks or handhelds allow users to get outside their home office more frequently, but they aren't the only options out there. Over the last year, Microsoft, Samsung and other companies have been creating a blueprint for a type of device they are calling the "ultra-mobile personal computer" or UMPC. Sometimes referred to as "convertibles," UMPCs are intended to offer something like a cross between a BlackBerry and a full-fledged notebook or desktop.

Sunnyvale, California-based Fujitsu Computer Systems, for example, recently launched the Lifebook U810, which has the storage of a regular machine (20GB on the hard drive, with a 40GB option), a business-class operating system (Windows XP Professional) and a 5.6-inch display panel with a touchscreen that can be operated by a stylus or finger.

Paul Moore, senior director of mobile product marketing, says UMPCs were initially met with scepticism by computer experts, but that's changing.

"At first there were usability concerns because you were talking about something designed around a screen rather than a keyboard," he says. "There were doubts about UMPCs' capabilities — could they really run strong applications, what was the battery life?"

Moore says Fujitsu has tried to make its U810 into something that the average home-office user would find comfortable, but perhaps more convenient than their other devices. There is a 56-key keyboard, for example, with 14-millimetre key pitch (the distance from one key to the centre of the next). The keyboard can be operated with thumbs while the user holds each edge of the machine, so it is possible to type while standing. Twisting the screen around turns it from what looks like a mini-notebook with a keyboard into a touch screen handheld device.

"We realized if you wanted to do something that contemplated a notebook, it has to act like a notebook," he says.

Watch for a lot more UMPCs to hit the market this year, which will likely be aimed at

home-office users who need a different kind of computing experience. For reviews, pictures and a lot more explanation, Gizmodo.com and Engadget.com are probably the best sources available online.

Step 3

Hang an online shingle

A home-based business can look like a much larger operation with the right website, as Brelak has learned. He had the good fortune of knowing someone with a business of building Internet portals. Besides paying for a domain name and an annual fee for use of the web server, Brelak says his investment is fairly minimal.

"All the content I write myself," he says. "I have a web-based system to post it. For a lot of the younger, computer-savvy customers I deal with, they really prefer to apply for things and fill out forms online."

Those systems for posting information are called content management systems and they can cost a lot to build from scratch. Instead of hiring a web developer, many businesses are using off-the-shelf tools such as Microsoft's Sharepoint or Novell's Teaming to easily set up and manage portals. The benefit may not simply be in creating a public website everyone can see, but a private portal that only selected clients could access to check the status of their portfolios.

Content management will probably become more important to home-based financial advisors as they start to offer more services online. A good way of tracking what's useful and what's not is a research analyst firm called CMS Watch, which issues regular reports on popular products and troubleshooting issues.

Step 4

Work without wires

Even if you have no plans to do any work from your kitchen table, it's helpful when you can take your work outside whatever room you've set up for your business. This, however, is where a lot of home-office workers find themselves getting tangled up in the process of moving from wired to wireless. It doesn't have to be such a pain.

One of the most common problems, especially in larger homes, is that the signal strength isn't that great. You may have bought a top-of-the-line notebook and some simple wireless networking equipment and still connect at only six megabits per second (Mbps) instead of a more desirable 54, which could cause problems in performance.

According to Mark Tauschek, senior analyst with Info-Tech Research Group in London, Ontario, many home-office workers mistakenly purchase equipment based on the 802.11g standard. A better choice is the forthcoming 802.11n, for which some products are already available. Tauschek says the difference between "g" and "n" amounts to much more than a letter.

"You can increase your coverage by at least 50 per cent," he says, adding that it's usually a case of simply replacing your wireless router, since many newer notebooks are compatible with the standard, which is expected to be officially ratified next year. "It's great for mobile or nomadic users, if they wanted to sit with a laptop in the living room or sit out on the patio on a nice day."

Some of the 802.11n routers include Linksys' WRT300N, D-Link's DIR-615 and Belkin's F5D8233-4 N.

Step 5

Secure your data

Most home-office users are probably familiar with the basics of data security: instal anti-virus software from companies such as Symantec or McAfee to ward off cyber-attacks and don't share the machine you use for work purposes with your family. None of those things will mean much, however, if you leave your notebook computer in a taxi, an airport lounge or some other public place. Data loss is a huge financial risk and also a violation of Canada's Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) if you have clients' private data on your hard drive.

This is the reason many technology vendors are developing a line of what they call "endpoint" security products that are designed to protect information when it's outside the perimeter of your home office. An example is Corsair's US\$29.99 "Flash Padlock," a thumb-sized portable hard drive that can store dozens of files at a time. The device sticks into the USB port of the average desktop or notebook and features "auto locking," which means no one will be able to see what's on it unless they use a touch-pad PIN entry system.

"I am sure a lot of small companies with scarce IT resources would not look for a solution until they are forced to," admits Steve Lee, a Corsair product manager. The fact that it can be set up within less than five minutes means most home-office users won't need a lot of technical background to put their minds at ease about data security.

Step 6

Have backup handy when you need it

Even if you follow every step in this article, you're going to run into problems. It's best to identify some of the tech support services in your area that can handle difficult jobs. Some of these firms charge for even basic over-the-telephone assistance, while others offer free consultations by phone and only charge for in-person calls.

At Geeks on the Way, president John Leishman says the goal is to have all major customer problems resolved in a 45-minute period. Many of his clients are home-based businesses, whether they are independent owner-operators or teleworking employees of a larger firm. Some of the most common issues Geeks on the Way deals with lately, he says, include customers who are upgrading all their systems to the latest version of Microsoft Windows, Vista. Others are struggling with transferring all their files from an old computer to a new computer.

"A lot of it depends on their past history of working with a computer," he says. "If they were a big user in some other company, there may be a lot of things they can resolve themselves. To call them hobbyists is probably the wrong word, but if they have an aptitude for that kind of problem-solving, it really helps."

Leishman recommends home-office users put aside enough money to call in some expertise at least once or twice a year. Some clients, he says, call Geeks on the Way at least once a month.

"If they have the extra money and don't want the extra hassle, they'll use us more. A lot of other people with more of a budget will rely on [looking up answers in] Google," he adds.

Besides Geeks on the Way, which has a number of locations across Canada, tech support firms such as Geek Squad and Nerds on Site are also expanding their franchises. If you prefer doing it yourself online, there's no need to hunt aimlessly around Google. AskTheAdmin.com is a highly comprehensive and free resource that takes questions directly from users and responds in layman's terms, often with a humorous approach. And when technology becomes troublesome, a good sense of humour may be one of the most important tools a home-based financial advisor can have.

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