Failure to plan is planning to fail

An Information Technology Perspective

An IT plan whether it be business, strategic or technical is critical to making intelligent decisions in terms of supporting the future requirements of any business. Here are 10 tips designed to assist you in your IT planning:

1. Servers.

Work on a 3 to 5 year Server replacement plan. Reasons for doing this are many, however most critically it will provide consistency and reliability.

2. Establish your growth rate.

Ensure that you have factored in the growth rate of your business in terms of additional users. This will allow you to forecast what technology requirements you will need to support the growth. Although this typically is a huge task, remember to include licensing costs, server requirements, bandwidth requirements in terms of internet usage, increased insurance costs and infrastructure requirements.

3. Social Media.

Ensure that you consider the younger generation. The reality is that they are bound to technology using various forms of social media such as mobile phones and the internet and are in most cases solely focused around social media communication. Being the future generation, ensure that both your marketing and IT Plans are strategically aligned to tap into this market. Employ the services of a Social Media Strategist to assist you with your plan.

4. Workstations.

Plan to cycle older workstations every 3 – 5 years; this should include office and operating system software. All too often companies only replace those units that are in need of replacement, this process impacts negatively on the business as the general age of hardware eventually exceeds the 3 to 5 year plan. This results in huge capital expenses and increased support costs which creates a financial trap. Instead focus on replacing units every 2nd or 3rd month consistently. As each business is different a plan must be derived that suites both company scale and budget. Preferably settle on a brand and stay with that brand. This will assist in terms of quicker and simpler support.

IBM
DELL
NETGEAR
Microsoft
MECER
TOSHIBA
intel
hp invent
Seagate
SONY
Canon
EPSON
lenovo

Service Level Agreements
Hardware Supplies & Support
Software Supplies & Support
Web Page development
Network Design & Implementation
Firewalls & Security
Internet Connectivity Solutions
Mobile Office Solutions
Retainers & Maintenance Solutions
Project Management Services
Office / Branch Connectivity

5. Your Web Presence.

Every quarter, make it a habit to Google both your name and business name. Review all the found results and cover at least the first 3 or 4 pages. Check for feedback and address any and all shortfalls such as complaints or other poor publicity. If you discover little or no detail, seriously review your web presence. The objective is to ensure that you have a web presence, that it is positive and that it is consistently growing. This is an inexpensive medium, a marketing tool that can drive your business forward, use it – in most cases it's free.

6. Internet Connectivity.

It is imperative to control and manage your internet consumption. Without utilising a management system you are placing your business at risk of exploitation from your staff, viruses, spyware and other external sources. To manage your businesses internet resource effectively ensure you have implemented a firewall. Fact is, some are better than others, make an educated decision. Ensure that the firewall can be updated, that it is easily upgradable in terms of accommodating any company growth, that it is adjustable in terms of user management, that it is capable of offering reports as to "whom is doing what and when", that it can accommodate additional internet connectivity options and finally that preferably it is offered as a managed solution. The last point is optional, however in terms of business security an outsourced solution tends to offer greater peace of mind versus that of an employee managed solution.

7. Focus on utilising cost saving technologies.

This investigation must include all aspects of your IT infrastructure. This in itself is a huge project, however savings can be vast. Be sure to investigate all aspects of your IT infrastructure which should include: Service level agreements, internet related costs, telephone and printing costs and insurances to name a few. Critically once all IT costs have been established, retain and maintain the IT expenditure.

This offers two immediate rewards, the ability to track costs and to provide a clear insight to where your focal areas should be. Not all expenses can be reduced; however technological solutions are available to assist this process. Printing as an example can be managed and costs reduced by removing non essential printers and replacing with a single multifunctional unit that uses codes to separate the printing of each employee.

Email management software will also substantially reduce the costs associated as rules may be applied to all incoming and outgoing mail reducing the amount of spam received, non essential "private" mails and "funny emails" to name a few simpler benefits. The correct firewall and firewall rules as an example will automatically reduce internet costs as it will limit abuse and in some cases offer a facility that will store visited web pages and downloaded files then distribute directly to the end user instead of re-downloading the content.
These are a few examples effective in reducing costs associated to maintaining your IT infrastructure.

8. Buy the best you can.

Get in the habit of paying that little extra. A few years back we replaced a number of workstations at a particular customer, we chose to implement the best technologies at that particular time. As expected the initial costs were higher than that of the required level machines due to the upgraded status. Three years down the line however, components are readily available for those units, they are still repairable and upgradable. More importantly they have not failed. Another qualified example is when dealing with servers, do not make the mistake and implement a server that will cover your needs now. Plan ahead, spend more and add that additional "unnecessary" drive space, the ability to add a second processor and more ram. In other words do a little forecasting, buy the best you can. This will reduce your support costs and allow for growth later on. Bottom line, it is money well spent.

9. Investigate outsourcing.

Companies are outsourcing certain aspects of their IT Infrastructure. Reasons for doing so are many however these are typically due to the internal support costs being too high or too time consuming. Other factors include, being too diversified in terms of skill base required internally to address each IT aspect. Outsourcing is the alternative and offers a number of immediate benefits: Faster response times, a "sort it out" attitude from both the company and the outsourced company, depth with "reserves on the bench" and specialist attention. Another immediate benefit is that the company can focus on key areas of IT and not be bogged down with the logistics of mundane or repetitive tasks.

10. Data Growth.

Remember to calculate the growth of your data. An easy method of measurement would be to create a simple spreadsheet with column A containing a list of all data storage areas, remember to include any and all databases such as Exchange, SQL, Oracle and Pervasive to name a few. Use columns B, C, D and E, labelling them as Q1, Q2, Q3 and Q4 respectively. Make it a habit to measure the sizes every quarter and capture this information in the respective quarter column. Using graphs and formulas you will be able to establish a measureable growth curve. Reasons for creating and maintaining this document are to establish the pace at which your data is growing allowing you to forecast what data storage requirements and complimentary server hardware would be required in the future. Another vital reason for following this process is to verify when a change in terms of database engine is required. As an example certain smaller database applications that support CRM software, Accounting Software and other database orientated applications have set limits in terms of the maximum database size and the amount of users that can connect to it.

Typically companies are often caught out as they are not aware of these limitations resulting in either changing the particular application or purchasing a database engine capable of running greater users and database sizes. All too often this is a costly change which reiterates the famous saying

"Failure to plan is planning to fail"

Written by: Brian Smith, Managing Director, IN 2 IT

IN2IT