

EXPERT CORNER

Virtual office can boost productivity, please employees

By Sean Hogan



Increased profitability and employee productivity is what we all strive for as business owners on a daily basis. Simply put, this is what keeps us going, because if we stop there is a good chance our company we will not be around tomorrow.

One strategy that's gaining tremendous popularity among senior management teams of small to mid-sized companies across the country is the deployment of virtual offices through the utilization of a company's existing technology.

You can actually tap into a current and fixed asset to expand your business, improve the bottom line, have more productive and happier employees, and achieve a work/life balance.

Basically, a virtual office fulfills all of the roles of the traditional, centralized office although the employees, also known as telecommuters, work at home offices either in a part or full-time capacity and collaborate for the most part electronically with other employees. Virtual offices are a matter of degree since even in conventional offices, many business relationships are maintained across distributed environments. For instance, customers and suppliers are located at different sites, and project co-workers are often located in different divisions. In both traditional and virtual office's the organization mission remains the same, but some business procedures change in the latter to accommodate collaboration at a distance.

In order to conduct business in this fashion, all that needs to be done is the integration of phone, computer, email, and fax. The other items that a company may need to deploy to truly allow owners and employees to occasionally work offsite is a Virtual Private Network (VPN) and Voice over Internet Protocol

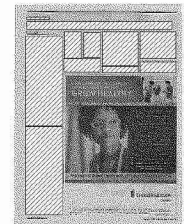
(VoIP). The VPN enables employees to connect to a network remotely so they can access files on the local area network, while operating in a secure environment. Furthermore, most cities have excellent wireless broadband coverage so individuals can connect to the Internet anytime, anywhere.

Unlike regular phone service, VoIP conversations are transformed into digital information and sent over a broadband data network. For example, VoIP calls connect to a server where voice information is truncated into packets and sent across the Internet bypassing the long distance carrier altogether. This essentially means that VoIP callers do not use traditional phone lines and can avoid expensive long-distance charges, dramatically impacting a company's bottom line.

There are a number of extraordinary benefits that businesses can obtain by giving the owner, the management team, and other employees the ability to work virtually. Dispersed sales teams can tap into the network and communicate via email or by using a remote IP phone from any location. A salesperson can connect through the VPN from their hotel room and they've instantly become their own virtual office. In addition, servicing customers means being available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. VoIP gives customer service representatives the advantage of answering calls at the office or at home.

Finally, with VoIP, employees have one phone number with one extension and it doesn't matter where they are geographically. More importantly, the person on the other end has no idea of one's location as long as they are receiving the services they desire. Combining these technologies gives businesses

the flexibility to provide an even higher level of customer service — all while reducing costs. As a result, consulting company, Gartner Group, estimates that employees who work offsite are as much as 40 percent more efficient than



their colleagues in the office.

Business owners can personally reap the benefits for themselves as well. For instance, owners of small to mid-sized companies have the unique option to work from home too by utilizing their existing technology. This enables them to avoid distractions to spend quality time working on their business and not in it. These valuable individuals are charged with guiding their company's strategic direction, enhancing the vision, and ensuring its mission. What better place to do that than in the comforts of a home office? Plus, the virtual office allows business owners in the retiring baby boomer generation a way to stay connected to their companies, continue to offer consultative advice and their years of experience and knowledge, while not being tied down to an 8-hour day.

By tapping into existing technology and adding a few minor features, organizations

of all sizes can take advantage of increased profitability and employee productivity that comes along with virtual offices. This concept has created a win-win-win for owners, employees, and customers. Individuals now have the ability to conduct business where and when they want, while meeting the demands of customers and at the same time increasing their quality of life. The first step towards implementing a successful virtual office is to select a telecommunications provider that understands your business needs. After that you can relax knowing you've just done a simple act that will positively impact your bottom line. ■

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