

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY NEEDS FOR SMALL EH&S BUSINESSES

Part 2: Software and Web Solutions

Once your small business has planned its information technology (IT) infrastructure—communications, network, computers, and other hardware—you are ready to consider your software needs, and how you can use the Internet to gain competitive advantage. Part 1 (*EM* August 2005, p 36) examined IT infrastructure, systems administration, and maintenance. This column considers software and Web solutions that work within the small business infrastructure.

SOFTWARE

Software can consume a large portion of your IT budget, and is as critical to your business as hardware. Software for



Jill Barson Gilbert, QEP, is president of Lexicon Systems, LLC. She helps organizations increase business value by designing and implementing EH&S management solutions that leverage technology. E-mail: JBGilbert@Lexicon-Systems.com.

small businesses includes basic business software, nice-to-have tools, and specialized software for environment, health, and safety (EH&S) professionals.

Business Basics

Accounting software (e.g., QuickBooks, Microsoft Small Business, MS Money, Quicken, Peachtree) is a must. The software features you need depend on how you expect to grow your business. Once set up, it can help you to focus on your real work! Many CPAs are certified in accounting software packages and can help you with initial setup. Even if your accountant prepares your taxes, you might find tax software like TurboTax helpful. It should integrate with your accounting package.

Productivity software for e-mail, word processing, spreadsheets, and presentations is also a must, as it creates a professional image. You can purchase a slimmed-down product like Microsoft Works, standard versions of Microsoft Office or Corel Office, or fully-loaded versions of Microsoft Office or Corel Office.

Be sure to protect your IT investment with virus and spyware detection software (e.g., Spybot, AdAware, McAfee, Norton). Many of these are available for free, or fairly inexpensive, especially when compared to the impact on your business.

Sometimes, the most important technology you can buy for your business is technology you can't see.

Nice-to-Have

If your small business involves large projects, many clients, business process analysis, or creative work products, then consider project management, contact management, flowcharting, publishing, and collaboration software. These applications typically integrate well with basic productivity software.

Think about a file-compression tool (e.g., WinZip, PKZip, StuffIt). This software compacts files for storage or for easier transfer via e-mail, and opens files received in .zip format. Adobe Acrobat or PDF Writer software lets you send proposals, reports, and other documents to customers in portable document format (PDF). This universal format enables easy document distribution, while preserving the original document layout. New Acrobat features also allow the PDF file author to route files for electronic markup. For screen shots and simple image editing, consider SnagIt from TechSmith. For more powerful photo/image editing, evaluate Adobe Photoshop Elements, Adobe Photoshop, Microsoft Digital Image Suite or PaintShop Pro.

Special Needs for EH&S Professionals

EH&S professionals may also have use for one or more of the following types of specialized software:

- Computer-aided design (CAD)—robust software for piping and instrumentation diagrams, construction plans, and specifications.
- Flowchart software—a design tool for engineering and business process flowcharts, organization charts, marketing diagrams, maps, and other graphics. Products include Microsoft Visio, Human Concepts OrgPlus, and IMSI FlowCharts.
- Air dispersion or groundwater modeling software—specialized software, available from Lakes Environmental, Trinity Consultants, Scientific Software Group, and others.
- Geographic information systems (GIS)—software used for mapping data. Vendors include MapInfo and ESRI.

WEB SOLUTIONS

Sometimes, the most important technology you can buy for your business is technology you can't see—Internet access and Web hosting. Small businesses can leverage the Internet beyond e-mail by establishing a Web presence and using the Web to collaborate with clients and colleagues.

Web Presence

Web presence is a key part of corporate identity. Even a small EH&S practice can benefit from having a Web site. Decide on the purpose of the Web site—to establish credentials (e.g., an electronic brochure), conduct e-commerce, serve as an information portal, or a combination of these—then design and maintain the site yourself or hire someone to do it. Web hosts, such as Earthlink, 1&1 Internet, Yahoo!, Roadrunner, and Microsoft Small Business, provide Web templates and design tools, or you may purchase commercial templates. Remember, Web sites are dynamic; they need periodic updates and makeovers to attract new customers and keep existing customers coming back. Find a reputable provider with a business package that meets your needs. A domain name (Web address or URL) costs only a few dollars per year. Monthly web hosting starts at around \$10/month and comes bundled with e-mail accounts. A wide range of e-commerce options is available. Your service provider can help you choose the right technical platform and hosting options to best suit your needs.

E-Mail

Keep your business and personal e-mail accounts separate. Reserve a domain name and use an e-mail "client" such as Lotus Notes, Microsoft Outlook, or Eudora. If you travel frequently, find a Web host with access to e-mail accounts from the Internet. In addition, establish separate e-mail accounts for each employee and a few administrative accounts, such as Admin, Info, and Sales, and be sure to back up your e-mail at least daily.

Make Sure the Software You Buy Works for You

- Integrated office suite
- Universal compatibility (file formats)
- The right tools for the job
- Ease of use
- Technical support pricing and availability

Collaboration

You can communicate with suppliers, vendors, colleagues, and clients over the Internet, using tools like MS Messenger (part of Windows XP) or free instant messaging services (for examples, see "Instant Messaging is Serious Business," *EM* April 2005, p. 42). Consider voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) services that let you talk over the Internet and share applications, or a more robust Web conferencing software (e.g., IBM/Lotus Sametime, Webex, Microsoft LiveMeeting), depending on your needs. Vendors typically offer both subscriptions and per-use pricing.

Finally, you can use your Web site to conduct surveys or for secure data transfer to and from customers. Most small business Web hosting packages include at least one file transfer protocol (ftp) address.

Software and Web solutions won't get you clients or keep you in business, but they are must-haves in order to run a professional practice. Make sure that you have the right tools to do the job. Don't pinch pennies, but don't feel the need purchase each and every new software release either. You can always add to your IT arsenal at a moment's notice. Vendors offer tutorials and free trials for the most popular software. Remember, you are an EH&S professional first. **em**

Software and Web Solutions Resources

Software, Reviews, and Tutorials

IBM/Lotus	www.ibm.com/software/lotus
Intuit	www.intuit.com
Corel	www.corel.com
Microsoft Office Online	www.microsoft.com/office
Microsoft Partner Home Page	https://partner.microsoft.com
CNet	www.cnet.com
ZDNet	www.zdnet.com
PC World	www.pcworld.com

Web Hosting

Yahoo!	http://smallbusiness.yahoo.com/webhosting/
FatCow	www.fatcow.com
1&1 Internet	www.1and1.com
Earthlink	www.earthlink.net
Roadrunner	www.rrbiz.com

Internet Domain Names

Network Solutions	www.networksolutions.com
Register.com	www.register.com