

Five essential technologies for start-up companies

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According to a national RBC survey, nearly 3.3 million people in this country plan to start their own businesses in the next four years. Many of them probably already have a good sense of the typical business-ownership challenges they'll face – ensuring excellent customer service, finding talented employees, turning a start-up into a growing, going concern...but many don't know what technologies they need to help get the business off the ground.

This is a serious matter for start-ups. These days IT is as fundamental as choosing the right location.

So to help start-ups ensure their IT investments support the business, here are the five essential technologies needed to meet new-business challenges.

1. Web site

Doing business demands a Web site. Whether selling online or letting people know it exists, the Web is the first place potential customers will look for the business. Start-ups need to ensure the site is up and running, secure and easy to manage.

It's a good idea to use a professional Web-design firm to help promote the business online. Look for a Web site shared-hosting provider offering self-management tools, so the business doesn't need to have an IT expert on staff to run the servers supporting the Web site. Hosting providers that combine hosting, design, domain-name registration ("www.companyname.com") and email make it simple to establish a Web location and remove the need to have an IT manager in-house.

2. Internet, email, fax and phone

Communication is the cornerstone of business. Internet, email, fax and phone services help companies connect with customers, suppliers and staff members.

High-speed Internet service for businesses isn't new, but some organizations are using it in new ways, combining high-speed data lines with point-of-sale debit- and credit-card machines for quicker checkout processing, for instance.

Email has become so much a part of everyday communication that people expect

it to be up, running and available 24-7. Email services offering 24-7 support, virus scanning, spam filtering and easy-to-use mailbox controls help start-ups keep connected and protected.

Some IT experts say fax is a dying technology, but for innumerable start-ups it's still important for receiving invoices, exchanging legal documents and processing purchase orders. Internet fax services allow employees to send and receive faxes securely from their computers, which saves time.

3. Wireless

Customers expect businesses to be available almost all the time. For start-up business operators, that means being able to answer calls, emails and review documents from any location.

Wireless Connect Cards for laptops allow businesses to access the Web, send and receive email and access corporate applications over high-speed wireless data networks, so business operators can always be productive.

Smartphones like the BlackBerry Curve 8830 provide voice, video and data in one handheld. They also add GPS, and with additional software, they provide turn-by-turn directions so users always know where they are, and where they're going – important for new customer-site visits.

Applications for smartphones make connectivity as rich as it is at the office, simplifying mobile and business productivity. For example, Visual Voice Mail converts voice mails into text and sends the messages via text messaging or email to any device, so users don't have to worry about missing important messages when they're unable to answer the phone.

Wireless solutions help start-ups work smarter. Advanced service providers offer a variety of devices, rate plans and support options combined with reliable voice and data networks to keep companies connected.

4. Computer Backups

Hard drive failures are real risks. Automatic computer backup services protect the business against downtime.

Unlike traditional backup methods such as saving data to re-writable CDs, automatic

backup services don't rely on someone re-installing the information manually, which wastes time. Automatic backups can also bring back earlier versions of documents – in some cases, the service recalls nine previous iterations – so if an employee inadvertently erases or changes something, the original document can be retrieved and the business is protected.

5. Collaboration tools

To be effective in business, it's important to tap all of the talent and creativity of the company's workforce. Audio, video and Web conferencing solutions facilitate this. Conferencing allows start-ups to conduct regularly-scheduled and spontaneous meetings online or over the phone, any time of day. Web conferencing adds a visual component so businesses can demonstrate new products to potential clients and deliver interactive employee training from anywhere, eliminating the need for everyone to be in a single location.

Software for document sharing makes quick work of long distances and gives people a collaborative online workspace to meet, share ideas and exchange information. In the past collaboration technologies like Microsoft's SharePoint were only available for larger companies that could afford to house the systems at their own offices, but with hosted solutions available, now start-ups can also benefit without needing specialized hardware or in-house IT expertise to manage it.

What Else?

There are thousands of industry applications that would also help start-ups get going, depending on the area and scope of the businesses. To choose those sector-specific technologies, focus on business challenges, and consider IT as part of the solution. For instance, think about providing excellent customer service. Think about the human resources issues. Consider growth. Consider competition. By focusing on business challenges, start-ups have an easier time choosing the IT components for their operations.