

Tech tools should increase efficiency, not stress

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Gadgets of all types are a fact of life in the 21st-century business world. Our standard operating tools range from cell phones and PDAs when we are on the move to sophisticated computers and peripherals back at the office. This is not a bad thing, especially for those of us who proudly carry the name “Geek.” In fact, there are some who think that the primary reason to acquire any cool tool is because it is just that — cool.

Then, there is the opposite end of the spectrum — the technophobe. These are the folks who function just fine without any “web,” spider or otherwise, and continue to do so, thank you very much. They are attempting to function with a 19th-century business model.

Most of us in the small-business world fall in the middle of this range. We have to be more practical in our choice of tools. Anything we purchase must earn its keep, or there is little reason to acquire it and take the time and trouble to learn it and put it to use. But how do we determine what works or not? What fancy gadgets are worth the trouble to show off their coolness?

Here are a few practical guidelines for applying technology in the business world without tearing out too much of your hair in the process.

Start by evaluating the task that needs to be done, not the latest technical innovation. Any piece of technology needs to address the work at hand or it’s not worth your hard-earned dollars to buy, or your time to learn and implement.

Take stock of the business machines and gadgets in your office right now. Evaluate them for age, usefulness, maintenance costs, headaches, etc. Is it time to replace anything? Is each tool saving work or causing more? Re-evaluate your tools regularly and take appropriate action.

If you are not sure what gadget to buy, take steps to educate yourself. Read reviews in the business and technology press, search the Internet or ask an expert. Buying the first thing you see on the store shelf may cost you in the long run.

Once you have invested in that new gadget, computer or software package, take the time to learn it, implement it properly and keep it up to date. Technology is a moving target for a reason. The old stuff gets better with updates, and your headaches in using and maintaining it will be fewer. It's worth the investment to stay current, particularly with software.

Evaluate how well you and your staff know your tools and systems. In my years of working with technology and a wide variety of companies, the most consistent problem I have observed is the failure to train people on the tools they use every day. Consider something as simple as how to use the fine setting on the fax machine. A surprising number of people are unaware of this useful feature, one that can keep your faxed documents legible and professional.

If you are investing in a major computer system, remember that the cost of the hardware and software is only a small portion of your overall investment. Factor in training, learning time and implementation assistance from consultants if the system is very complex. Don't skimp on training. It is the biggest mistake clients make, particularly small-business clients with limited budgets. This is not the place to economize.

The days of operating a business in a technology-free environment are gone forever. With some careful analysis of the task at hand, informed selection of a tool to apply to the task and the training to use it properly, there is no reason your business tools and systems can't help you do your work more efficiently and effectively without driving you around the bend in the process.

When in doubt, hire a technical expert or business adviser to help you get the most from your tools and technology so you can keep your primary focus on what you do best. In doing so, you just might optimize your operating results, and that is the name of the game in the end.

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