

Tech Tools For Your Business

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In the last issue, my husband and business partner shared advice based on the experience of our own company regarding the importance of using surge protectors and/or uninterruptible power supplies. As a reminder, you should plug all critical hardware and equipment into an uninterruptible power supply (UPS) to prevent losing critical information as a result of a power outage. A UPS will give you five to 15 minutes of additional power so you can save your open files and safely shut down your computer. Some uninterruptible power supplies also contain surge protectors, which serve to further protect your hardware and equipment.

In this issue, let's take a look at some other useful devices that will support your business productivity. There have never been so many from which to choose!

All-in-One Printer/Fax/Scanner/Copier

Black and white printers have become commonplace in offices and stores, and multifunctional machines that allow you to print, fax, scan and make copies – all in one device. They can prove not only efficient, but also a great value for all they allow you to accomplish.

Flash Drives

I could do an entire column on backup strategies and options, and hopefully you have some simple and straightforward or perhaps more sophisticated method of regularly backing up your files. Backing up your data on a consistent basis is critical for your business.

One of the easiest ways to quickly back up files and also easily take key files with you off-site is to use a flash drive. A flash drive basically serves as a portable hard drive. Just connect this very small device to your computer and drag over the files you wish to back up. This device proves very handy as well when you need to transfer one or more files from one computer to another. Perhaps you have a PowerPoint file you are taking to make a presentation at a conference or meeting, or perhaps you have a customer file you wish to take to the customer's site or a file you would like to easily access at a variety of locations.

The flash drive is a perfect device to use. It won't give you as much storage capacity as an external hard drive, but its durability and portability make it a must-have device. Toss it into your pocket or purse or use it as a key fob. These small storage devices range in capacity from 8MB up to 64GB. I always carry my one gigabyte drive, which costed approximately \$16.

Digital Cameras

Digital cameras are available in a wide range of prices and features and are useful for a host of applications. You certainly may use them to take product shots for catalogs or for print or online advertising pieces. They are a handy tool to provide backup for insurance records and can be used to assist you in conducting a visual inventory of products.

You might even use them to make quick employee ID tags or to create promotional items. You may be see-

ing interest in digital cameras in the schools, as educators are increasingly finding ways to use them in science, on field trips, for digital storytelling and more. They now outsell the more traditional 35mm cameras and are typically very easy to use and to focus. And the ability to easily connect most digital cameras to a computer makes image sharing, modifying and reproduction a snap. Some also have the ability to capture sound or video. Consider how you might use easy-to-capture images to enhance your own business productivity.

Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs)

Do you have your own handheld device yet? For some, this is an automatic electronic alternative to what was previously a print calendar, appointment book and to-do list. PDAs combine some of the functionality of a computer, telephone, fax, the Internet and networking. Use a PDA as a cell phone. Receive and send e-mail messages. Send a fax. Browse the Web. Access your address book. Keep your calendar and lists. Start or update a spreadsheet with your travel expenses. And for diversion, play games. PDAs have grown in popularity due to the increasingly mobile nature of our work and the desire or requirement, whether you perceive this as positive or negative, to be accessible and connected at all times.

PDAs may use a stylus, a pen-like instrument to point to commands and select menu options and information, on a touch-sensitive screen – popular examples of these are the Palm Pilot and any Windows Pocket PC device. With a stylus, the PDA can often recognize handwriting, such as when you jot down a reminder or place an event on your electronic calendar. Other PDAs may make use of a small keyboard, perhaps accessed primarily by your thumbs – popular examples of this type of device are the Blackberry and Palm Treo.

PDAs are often referred to simply as handhelds or even pocket computers. Most allow the user to "synch" (for synchronize) or connect data on the handheld with data on the user's primary

computer, so the user sees all of the same information on each device, e.g. calendar items may be integrated into a master file, and updates to contact records may be merged into an Outlook or other contact database. As is true for digital classrooms, these handheld devices are growing in numbers in classrooms – for word processing and note-taking any place and at any time, for ongoing student observation and assessment, for easy access to data or electronic resources when needed and other applications. PDAs are thought by some to have greater promise than more costly desktop or even laptop computers for achieving 1-to-1 computing access for students. And for businesses, they make it easier for many to manage work at the time and in the places that allow users to be most productive.

USB Hubs

We have talked about several cool devices to help boost your business productivity. The common denominator among them is that they all need to be connected to your computer via the universal serial bus (USB) ports. Peripherals such as your computer mouse attach to your computer via a USB port, as does your keyboard and your printer.

The problem is that you may well have more peripheral devices than USB ports on your computer! Enter the USB hub. This device simply provides you with additional ports. Just like any other USB device, the hub plugs into a USB port on your computer and provides additional USB ports for your varied peripherals. In some cases, the peripherals themselves may also contain hubs, resulting in even more available ports piggybacked onto the one to which they are connected.

As I put the finishing touches on this column, my daughter gave me a 4-port USB hub about the size of a credit card – she had gotten it as a promotional give-away item. How cool is that?! Curious, I checked it out on the Web and found it sold for \$5.99 and even less for increased order volume!

The use of technology to run your business and help it to grow is ever-more accessible as options expand and prices decrease.

Consider adding some of these devices to your own business productivity tools.

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