

Connecting Outside the Office

Keep your workers productive no matter where they are

It's no secret that small businesses are faced with constant pressure to increase efficiency and achieve high levels of productivity. That's why connecting outside the office, or mobile working, is an important business practice to consider. With the right connectivity technology, you'll have the competitive advantage of being able to collaborate, respond to customer needs and handle other critical tasks anywhere, anytime.

Naturally, choosing the connectivity systems and tools that fit your business budget and requirements will be key to your mobile working success. This white paper presents technology options and step-by-step instruction on how to begin optimizing your ability to connect outside the office.

Related guides:

Connecting inside the office

Harnessing Internet-based computing

Case study synopsis: Cycle Oregon

OBJECTIVE

- Keep a small group of workers connected to the data they need, even while working in remote areas.
- Allow the team to coordinate schedules, update projects and share files from separate locations.
- Securely store data and provide access only to authorized users.

SOLUTION

- Installed Microsoft Small Business Server on dedicated hardware, replacing a peer-to-peer network.
- Created a virtual private network (VPN) to control access.

RESULT

- Workers have group functionality for e-mail, calendar sharing, task creation, file sharing and more.
- The VPN provides secure access from anywhere a worker can connect to the Internet.
- Updated data is accessible through either laptops or smartphones.
- Data on the server is reachable, usable, secure, stable and backed up.

For the full case study, please see our brochure.

Seven steps to set up outside connectivity

If you or your team work outside the office or from home, it's critical that you have the right communication strategy, tools and technology for your business. Here are seven steps to follow (plus questions to ask) to help you implement the best system for connecting outside the office.

STEP 1: Define your mobile working needs

Before you dive into technology solutions, outline your business' mobile working needs, goals and budget. Consider:

- Who in your business needs to work while on the go? This will influence how many and what types of mobile solutions you need.
- Where will they be working? This will affect your choice of connection technology.
- What do they need to be able to do: access shared data, email, teleconference? This will apply to your purchase decisions for computers, phones and voice and data services.

For instance, do you simply need to enable telecommuting for yourself or some key employees? Then perhaps you only need a few laptops or netbooks. Or do you need to ensure that you and your team can work on the go anytime, with secure access to shared data, email and conferencing capability? Then you'll be looking at phone, computer and connectivity solutions.

Tip: Whatever type of phone you choose, ask your service provider about "reach me" or "follow me" services that allow you to send or forward calls. This way, customers or associates can dial a single number, and the call can automatically forward to a mobile device, home phone or other number.

STEP 2: Choose your tools

For complete mobile working, each member of your team is likely to need two devices: a mobile computer and a phone.

Mobile computers

Full-size laptops are no longer your only option for mobile computing. Ask these simple questions to help you decide between laptops, netbooks and tablet computers.

- Do you need mobile functionality equivalent to a desktop computer in order to work on detailed reports and visually rich documents? Today's laptops feature the faster processors, longer battery life, lighter weights and more connectivity options that make do-it-all mobile computing more productive and convenient than it used to be.
- Do you and your team work on less complex documents while outside the office? You may prefer the lighter weight, better portability, lower price and higher energy efficiency of a netbook. You'll sacrifice some processing power, graphics capability and screen size compared to laptops. Also, netbooks have no optical drives for CDs or DVDs – you'll have to supply that separately if needed.
- If your mobile working needs require accessing content rather than creating it, you may benefit from one of the new wave of customizable touch-screen tablets. Unlike netbooks, tablets don't attempt to replicate the full functionality of laptops and desktop computers; instead, they allow you to choose from a menu of software applications, so your tablet only has to support the functions you need.

Phone options

Smartphone or simple wireless phone? It depends on what your team needs to accomplish on the go.

If they travel often for work, require constant access to email, the Internet and phone calls, and must quickly access basic documents to work online, a smartphone can be a convenient, single solution. However, if they also need to create content while out of the office, they may still need a mobile computer for the larger screen and range of capabilities.

If telecommuting, rather than working on the road, is what your team needs, it may make more sense to provide wireless phones for basic calls, e-mails and texting in addition to mobile computers.

STEP 3: Choose the right connection technology

As your mobile workers need to connect to your office network from remote spots, there are several technology choices available. Workers can use one or a combination of these.

Wi-Fi

Do your workers typically do their remote work in places where they can stay for extended periods? If so, Wi-Fi may be the right connection choice. It's available in nearly every hotel, coffee shop and airport, often at no charge, and typical bandwidth ranges between 256k and 5 Mbps. But workers must find and stay within the limited area of coverage, share available bandwidth with other users and deal with the security concerns of public networks.

WiMAX

If you or your team need more widespread, reliable access to wireless communication — if you often travel locally to visit clients, for instance — WiMAX may be your best choice. WiMax service can typically cover a distance of 5 miles or more, and multiple users should not diminish performance as bandwidth typically spans 1-5 Mbps. But WiMAX ties you into a single carrier, and its monthly cost structure makes it more expensive than Wi-Fi.

Mobile broadband

Do your workers need the ability to connect wirelessly from virtually anywhere, including on the move? A mobile broadband card or modem provides access anywhere you can get a wireless phone signal. But signal strength and stability are not always guaranteed, and time spent online may count against a provider plan's usage limit.

STEP 4: Choose services that enhance real-time collaboration

Although you and your team may be able to work from anywhere, communicating via emails, messaging and phone calls may prove too fragmented for resolving issues and completing projects. Ongoing phone tag or email overload can end up stalling projects instead of facilitating them. And if your people don't communicate about the latest version of a document or otherwise rely on outdated information while out of the office, your mobile working benefits clearly decrease.

That's where **online collaboration suites** and **remote conferencing options** can help. **Online collaboration suites** allow you to access shared information and projects online. So anywhere you can connect to the Internet, you'll have the convenience of working together in the same place.

Services vary among providers, but online collaboration suites often include:

- Business email
- Instant messaging
- Contact management
- Calendars
- File sharing
- Document management
- Project management
- Portals
- Workspaces
- Web conferencing
- Social media tools such as forums and wikis (simple web pages that groups can edit together)

Since these are Web-based services, there are no hardware, software or special IT requirements; you simply log in to buy and use the service. Depending on the vendor, you may pay a certain monthly or annual rate per user, and many vendors offer free trials.

Online collaboration suite options include Google Apps, Hosted Exchange, Microsoft Business and Office Productivity Suite, CentralDesktop, and Zoho Business.

What if your collaboration needs center on discussions and presentations more than project management or production? When you need to facilitate better group communication in real time, consider your **remote conferencing options: teleconferencing, video conferencing and web conferencing.**

- **Teleconferencing** is typically inexpensive and easy to set up, teleconferencing simply allows multiple users to dial into a phone call. Calls can be hosted internally or through a third-party service provider. Teleconferencing is more collaborative than flurries of emails between a group, but it's not always clear who's talking, and time lags sometimes result in people talking at the same time.
- **Web conferencing** is better for presentations as it allows users to share documents and visuals in real time via websites or software programs like NetMeeting. Typical features include slide presentations, whiteboard annotation, live video, text chat, and real-time audio (using Voice over IP [VoIP] technology).
- **Videoconferencing** naturally enhances collaboration since you can see what's happening, who's speaking and effectively share materials in real time. Videoconferencing is often available through Web conferencing services, but you'll need to post cameras in your conference area or at individual workstations.

STEP 5: Address security needs with solutions and policies

The flexibility and productivity you gain from mobile working have a potential cost: security threats from using public networks (Wi-Fi) and potential data loss or theft. To make mobile working more secure, use encryption, set up a virtual private network (VPN) and establish security policies for mobile working.

Encryption

Encryption software encodes data into an unreadable series of characters with a secret key or password so you can send or store it securely. Encrypting mobile computer files, hard drives and backup media will help protect your important company data outside the office.

When choosing an encryption solution, check that it is based on open security standards and read industry reviews of the product. RSA and TrueCrypt are two options you could consider.

How big is telecommuting?

- The world's mobile population is expected to grow to nearly 1.2 billion by the end of 2013.¹
- More than half of small businesses surveyed for Microsoft's SMB Insight Report 2009 anticipated an increase in the number of remote workers, and 60 percent expected that the shift to more remote workers would lead to bigger roles and more responsibilities for those working remotely.²
- While less than three percent of the U.S. workforce currently works from home (not including the self-employed), 40 percent have jobs that would allow them to telecommute.³

¹IDC, Worldwide Mobile Worker Population 2009-2013 Forecast, Doc#221309, December 2009

²2009 Microsoft SMB Insight Report, March 25, 2009.
<http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/presskits/smb/docs/Microsoft2009SMBInsightsReport.doc>

³Tom Harnish, August 31, 2010

VPN

The most common secure communications conduit is a virtual private network (VPN), which creates a "tunnel" through which encrypted data travels from the remote worker's device to the company's internal network. This allows you and your team to communicate with co-workers and access central data securely from a distance. (Note: the mobile devices must have VPN software to enable encryption.)

Many VPNs include laptop monitors that allow users to make only certain approved actions when connected. SNAP VPN, Untangle, Microsoft and Cisco are some of the vendors that offer VPN options appropriate for small businesses.

Policies

Spell out the dos and don'ts of mobile working for your team to help prevent security threats. For instance, you may want to make it clear that mobile workers must always connect via a VPN, encrypt their files and avoid certain websites. It's also a good idea to establish a policy for what to do in the event of mobile device loss or theft. (For more computing security guidance, see the *Preventing security threats and unwanted activities* brochure and white paper.)

STEP 6: Ensure technical support for mobile workers

Mobile employees typically won't have convenient access to on-site technical support. When choosing your mobile solutions providers, especially for phone and connectivity solutions, ask if they can offer reliable 24/7 support and potentially expand their services to accommodate more employees. (Always plan for growth!)

STEP 7: Strike the right management balance

Getting the most out of a mobile workforce requires self-disciplined employees and deft management. Management needs to ensure that they neither under- or over-communicate with mobile workers. A lack of communication can lead to increased stress and isolation, while over-communication can feel like micromanagement and undermine confidence.

Connecting trends for small businesses

Here are some current trends in the small business world that relate to connecting outside the office:

- **Netbook adoption accelerates**
Growth of netbook sales, ideal tools for workers on the go, accelerated sharply over the last several years. For simple Web browsing, e-mail and other light computing needs, they're being used more and more by mobile workers.
- **Built-in wireless broadband usage widens**
Many mobile workers use external wireless cards, which provide wireless phone connectivity for mobile computing just about anywhere in the United States. This connectivity, with service from a major cellular carrier, is especially handy when Wi-Fi is not an option.
- **Unified communications increase**
An increasing number of companies are investing in unified communication (UC) systems. These systems place the power of telephony onto the computer and integrate telephone, customer relationship management (CRM), chat, address book, calendar and other functions. Many vendors are also developing feature-rich and low-cost UC platforms specifically for small businesses. Many of these systems work in conjunction with voice over IP (VoIP) solutions and allow workers to use a telephone, PC or smartphone to access the UC features.

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