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Network News: The Latest In Small Office Networks

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Want to save money, share resources, and gain efficiencies in your business? Set up a computer network.

Want to spend megabucks, experience frustrating downtime, and waste time on computer maintenance? Run a computer network with old, out-of-date equipment.

As technology advances, computer networks continue to become easier to set up and maintain. Done right, they can be a tremendous asset to your business. Read on for the latest network news!

Your First Network

Most people start out with a peer-to-peer network. This means there is no server—the computers talk directly to one another, as peers. If you have Windows XP, setup is fairly easy and can be done entirely through wizards. With older versions of Windows, the mechanics are a little more complicated, especially for the novice, but it certainly can be done.

These days, with high-speed Internet connections, a network makes more sense than ever. Networked computers can share not just your Internet connection, but also printers and files. You can even backup files from one computer to another.

While you can connect two computers directly together, your network will be much more reliable if you purchase a router. A router will manage your network for you, by “routing” the signals between your computers and your Internet connection. In addition, most routers have a built-in firewall that will provide some protection against hackers.

Your First Server

When you have 5 to 10 computers on your

network, simplify your life with a server. Performance becomes an issue on large peer-to-peer networks; also, dealing with patches, updates, data, backups, and printers on that many computers starts to become a maintenance nightmare, expensive and time-consuming.

With a server and the right software, you can maintain all the computers on your network in one central place. The server can distribute patches and upgrades; it can manage virus protection and security; it can store files for easy backup; and it can handle all your printers. Why make the same changes ten times, on ten different computers, when you can have the server do the work for you?

When choosing a server, opt for new software and hardware if possible. Servers have a 3-5 year lifespan, and reconfiguring an old machine rarely saves money, long-term. New hardware performs better and more reliably; new software is easier to use and more secure. Microsoft's Small Business Server is an excellent choice for most small businesses. Microsoft has combined several products into one, making it an excellent value, and setup is wizard-based, so it is easy to maintain.

Regardless of which server you choose, be sure to put appropriate security into place, with firewalls, virus protection, spam-blocking, and spyware prevention. A server gives you the ability to better control these pesky problems, so take full advantage.

Remote Access

Another advantage of having a server? Remote access—the ability to connect to your office network from home or just about anywhere else. Windows offers a service called Remote Desktop, which allows a secure login to your network. This is fairly

easy to set up. For more advanced applications or high-security needs, you can set up a virtual private network (VPN). This will require special equipment and software.

Microsoft also offers tools for web-based remote access—Outlook Web Access and Sharepoint. Outlook on the web looks almost identical to the regular desktop version, and allows you to check email from any Internet connection. While it allows you to do nearly everything the typical email user would do, it does have some limitations and will not work with custom forms and functions.

Sharepoint is a tool to help teams work together. Like Outlook Web Access, it can be set up to be accessible from any Internet connection. You can share files, lists, calendars, contact...you name it, you can put it on a Sharepoint website. It is very easy to use and maintain, and once it's set up, you can make changes and updates yourself.

Wireless Networks

Going wireless is very popular right now. If you've got a laptop, wireless access gives you the freedom to work nearly anywhere you want. Hotspots—places to connect wirelessly—are popping up everywhere from the airport to Starbucks to McDonalds. However, anything transmitted wirelessly can be intercepted by someone else at these public hotspots. Are you comfortable with the thought of someone else reading your email? Even worse, someone could intercept your passwords at an insecure, unencrypted website. (If you see an https: in the address line instead of http:, the site is secure).

On your own wireless network, turn on the highest level of security available. This will prevent the security issues you face at public hotspots. Newer equipment offers

WPA security, far better than the WEP security you will find on older wireless equipment. However, you still need to monitor your network closely—any wireless network is vulnerable to attack. You might be surprised at how far your wireless network extends, and your network must be locked down tight to prevent any unwanted intrusions.

Need A New Network?

A well-built network will run smoothly and help your business be more productive. The latest tools make networking easier and safer than ever. If your current network is giving you headaches, maybe it's time for an upgrade. Try out the latest technology and

see how much better things can be!

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