Ashton
TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS

Treat IT as an investment, not an expense

With standardization, consistency and vision, your technology spend can increase your bottom line. By Jim Abbott.

We were contacted by a law firm with serious, ongoing IT issues. The most serious: mission-critical databases couldn't communicate with each other, leading to all sorts of delays. Additionally, the firm's outsourced IT provider wasn't holding up its end of the deal; slow response time and inefficient solutions had become unacceptable. The firm's on-staff IT professional was spending too many nights and weekends at the office, trying to keep up with the constant disruptions, and had no time to plan for the future.

In an initial conversation, we learned that the firm had dealt with four or five different IT providers in as many years. None had been able to solve the software problem, or deliver on their service-level agreements — or so we were led to believe. When we examined the network and suggested a solution which would solve the database problem, once and for all (a one-time software purchase costing around $5,000), the firm's managers rejected it. They also turned down an offer of monthly managed service that would free up their IT staffer to focus on other, long-neglected responsibilities. We started to understand the revolving door of providers. Management seemed to view IT as an expense to be cut whenever possible, not an investment in efficiency, productivity and growth.

The generally accepted rule for IT spending is that it should equal 2 to 3 percent of revenue. That can vary from year to year, as your organization changes, but IT spending is always an investment if you view it with these principles in mind:

• Standardization: Build a platform for stability and growth by purchasing hardware, software and services that are complementary and scalable.
• Consistency: Ensure redundancy of knowledge so that personnel and/or vendor changes aren't disruptive.
• Vision: Buy what you really need, no more and no less, and always in alignment with your short- and long-term business goals.

Here are some examples of companies we've helped to leverage technology for lasting business results.

Company A (software developer): The chief technology officer was responsible for all day-to-day IT issues — new user setups, laptop repairs, security monitoring, backups, etc. This is sort of like a CEO personally overseeing onboarding and ordering office supplies. We were able to take all of the routine work off the CTO's to-do list, as well as vendor management for telephone, Internet and other hosted services. This freed up about 50 hours per month of the CTO's time, which he now can devote to big-picture issues and long-term plans.

Company B (investment advisor): This organization's troubles began with over-investment. A former IT manager had built a network big enough for 1,200 employees — for an organization that had about 25 (and only one IT person). That may sound like a good problem, but the system was extremely costly to manage: the infrastructure had been set up with separate networks for servers, workstations, wireless, phones, and network ports that required manual management. Plus, the hardware was outdated and starting to fail. As a result, the current IT manager spent more time keeping the machinery oiled and functioning, than on the growth-related duties he'd been hired for; business process

and application development. Company B hired us to scale down the network to make management easier, and to provide monitoring, disaster recovery and strategic planning that had previously been missing. The IT manager has been able to refocus on business strategy as the company enters an ambitious growth phase.

Company C (architecture firm): This was another case of an over-engineered network that left the internal IT manager stretched too thin. We discovered that much of the trouble could be traced to the network addressing scheme — the company wasn't using a private IP address, leading to various issues with name resolution. We re-configured the entire network, and initiated monitored, tested and properly functioning backups and disaster recovery. We also brought business analytics to the organization, by providing access to our management and ticketing tools. The IT manager sees every request for support logged by the firm's associates. She can intercept and handle them herself or leave them for us, but more important, this real-time data helps her spot trends and identify impending IT needs.

No matter what industry you're in, your organization probably has sales, marketing, HR, operations and finance departments. IT is crucial to every one of them. And like those departments, your IT planning should always be informed not just by immediate needs, but expected ones. Helping clients achieve that balance is Ashton's highest priority.

Jim Abbott is director of sales and marketing for Ashton Technology Solutions, based in Cleveland, Ohio. Ashton brings efficiency and peace of mind to IT, and helps clients leverage technology for lasting business results. Find out more at ashtonsolutions.com.