

Networks connect your world securely, reliably and more efficiently.

People in small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) regularly connect with others who are vital to their success. Customers bring income. Partners, such as contractors and suppliers, provide services and products for daily operations. Prospects are vital for growth and new opportunities. And employees are the brains, hands, eyes, and ears that make a business successful.

A network can connect them all, according to Deb Mielke, operator of HomeOfficeReports.com, a Web site providing technology advice and information to small and home-based businesses. **"Electronic communication is a great way to reach a lot of people,"** she says. **"The beauty of networking and the Internet is that it can make a little guy look like a big guy."**

But what is a network? And how can it connect your world securely, reliably, and efficiently?

Cisco commonly refers to the concept of a Secure Network Foundation which encompasses a flexible communications platform that both delivers business information needs and positions a company for growth. Note that "computer" is nowhere in that definition. That's because networks, even in the smallest businesses, can do more than simply connect machines. They also deliver voice (telephone) and video, and connect functions such as sales and bookkeeping to make business more efficient, collaborative, and profitable.

CORE NETWORK COMPONENTS

Routers and switches are the foundation of every network, physically connecting everything. Not long ago, that meant computers, printers, and maybe servers. But now it includes wireless devices and telephones, too. As a network's foundation, routing and switching gear should have room to grow, both in capacity (number of users) and capability.

Security means keeping a network safe from intruders, repelling computer viruses and other electronic pests, and ensuring that IT resources aren't abused. Business owners are naturally concerned about security, and for good reason. *"More and more small and medium-sized businesses today are putting critical data - company financials and customer information -- on PCs,"* says Craig Vosburgh, senior product manager at Verio, a company providing web hosting, online backup, and other network-powered services to SMBs. When Verio polled over 400 of its business customers last July, 70% said a single loss of business data would be "significant and costly."

Fortunately, strong security is within reach. *"There's some very good equipment out there that's easy to set up,"* Mielke says. *"Security is like an insurance policy -- you want to*

have enough to mitigate risk, and for small business owners that's fairly inexpensive to do."

Wireless networks provide the freedom to move, either within your own facility or out in the world. The same wireless technology used in-building can also support mobile and remote workers.

IP Communications lets an SMB add voice and video to the network. You sometimes hear this called Voice over IP (VoIP); the broader terms IP Communications or Converged Networks. Over 17% of SMBs have converged networks, according to CompTIA's survey, and another 29% are moving toward convergence. Two-thirds of these businesses with separate voice and data networks see value in convergence.

Applications describes using a network for more than simply moving files. E-mail is the most common example, but other network-powered, or "hosted" applications such as customer relationship management and sales force automation appeal to SMBs, Vosburgh says. This is especially true for companies with heavier regulatory burdens, such as medical and financial practices, who want technical challenges handled by a specialist.

As IP phones become more powerful, they're supplanting computers in some applications such as timekeeping, order entry, and inventory management so that applications are run on the phone.

RESPONSIVE, CONNECTED, AND EFFICIENT

The five core network components combine to make SMBs more responsive to customers, better connected with stakeholders, and more efficient in their operations.

- **Responsive.** Networks give customers more options to communicate with an SMB, thus giving them more ways to buy.
- **Connected.** "A converged solution, to a small business, has potentially a lot more impact than to a large business," McCarthy says, "because [small businesses] tend to rely more on the phone to touch their customers."
- **Efficient.** Efficiency is clearly a driver for SMBs: CompTIA's survey showed that saving money by streamlining business processes was the top motivator for 46% of SMBs investing in new communications technologies.

FOCUS ON GOALS

As CompTIA's study shows, network-powered converged communication technology is poised to take off among SMBs. It's happening not because SMBs want to have the latest gadgets, but because they see business value in connecting their world. "Their goal isn't the adoption of technology," McCarthy says, "but being more efficient and more capable".