

## Five Ways to Improve Your Company's Efficiency

### The network helps improve operations, cut costs and more.

Small and medium-sized business (SMB) customers and suppliers are increasingly savvy, with high expectations for immediate and personalised service and support. Expectations are rising and yet SMBs are also under pressure to do more with the same or fewer resources.

“The pace of competition is accelerating and SMBs must compete with larger, better-funded businesses while keeping ahead of smaller, leaner competitors,” says Ray Boggs, vice president of SMB research for IDC.

The solution: find new ways to optimise operational efficiency in order to improve productivity and reduce costs. “The network can play a significant role in improving business efficiency by ensuring that customers, employees and suppliers get secure access to real-time data to improve business decision making and, ultimately, customer service,” says Lauren Ventura, senior director of commercial market management at Cisco Systems.

According to IDC research, 60.2 per cent of SMBs with 100 to 999 employees cited improving efficiency as their top business priority in 2005. And yet, only 23 per cent of those same businesses rated efficiency-enhancing infrastructure investments, such as expanding or upgrading a network, as a high priority.

Here's a look at five business challenges SMBs face today, and how a secure Cisco network can provide your company with a new way of doing business to improve efficiency, cut costs and more.

- **Providing Easy Access to Information**

Delivering speedy access to information so employees can make solid business decisions is a challenge nearly all SMBs face. Networks that are slow, frequently down, or unsecured don't allow employees to move quickly, which could result in lost opportunities and revenues.

For example, Elliance, an online-marketing firm in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, had a simple hub-based network which frequently slowed to a crawl when employees downloaded large files. Elliance built a new high-performance network, reducing response time to “milliseconds,” says CEO Abu Noaman. As a result, employees can now quickly post and access core business intelligence on customers, vendors, team members and processes. “Our technology keeps the sales and brand manager in front of the clients at all times,” Noaman adds, and that has enabled Elliance to enter new markets while maintaining the same size sales team.

- **Delivering Anywhere, Anytime Access**

SMBs today have to provide employees working in hotel rooms, airport lounges, remote branches and home offices with anywhere access to information. Without it, mobile and remote workers lose valuable time. Worse, sales personnel may have outdated customer information or miss urgent messages informing them of a critical business matter.

An Internet Protocol (IP) network connects remote and mobile workers to an SMB's critical applications such as customer-relationship management and sales force automation tools, along with e-mail, instant messaging and other tools. A unified IP network supplies easy access to application data and can support voice and video applications, too. A virtual private network solution makes remote and mobile access secure.

- **Creating Effective Business Processes with Partners**

Inefficient operations can prevent an otherwise qualified SMB from doing business with some organisations, according to Ventura. For example, some national retailers require their suppliers to follow certain efficiency-enhancing procedures, and SMBs that don't meet the criteria are out of the running.

"A network with top-notch security and reliability is key to enabling SMBs to develop efficient business processes that meet their partners' needs," Ventura says.

- **Ensuring Regulatory Compliance**

Government regulations mandating higher levels of customer or patient privacy is another ongoing challenge for companies of all sizes. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996, for instance, established standardised methods for the electronic exchange, security and confidentiality of healthcare data.

Seven Counties Services, Inc., a Louisville, Kentucky-based non-profit organisation that provides mental-health support services, deployed a secure IP network for integrated voice, video and data communications. A firewall and intrusion detection system keeps patient data secure while IP Communications improves efficiency.

- **Enhancing Employee Collaboration**

Without solid and frequent collaboration among employees, good ideas die and opportunities are missed. The result: Valuable workers, frustrated by the operational inefficiencies that result from poor collaboration, may become disheartened and depart for other jobs. And yet, how does an SMB develop a richly collaborative environment when many employees work remotely or on the go? An IP network with integrated voice, video, data and wireless communications delivers interactive calendaring, Web-based videoconferencing, IP telephony and other tools that foster collaboration.

### **Creating Efficiencies by Mapping Objectives to Technology**

A secure, scalable, continuously available IP network from Cisco Systems provides the infrastructure needed to achieve efficiencies throughout your operations. But Cisco provides more than just network hardware and software. Acting as trusted advisors, Cisco and its resellers and managed-services providers work closely with SMBs to identify key business challenges, evolve to the business requirements, and then align solutions that meet those challenges. In addition, local Cisco resellers can provide the service and support needed to successfully deploy and operate an SMB network. And Cisco Systems Capital provides SMBs with innovative, flexible leasing and financing programmes at competitive rates.

“When you have this kind of single-vendor, soup-to-nuts solution in place, your business has much less to manage,” Ventura says. “Your operational costs are reduced, too. But most of all, you’ve got a network that evolves with your business so you’re where you need to be today and you can be where you need to be tomorrow.”

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