Starting up your IT

You could start a business without a computer, but it wouldn't be easy. Technology is a vital tool for productivity and communication and a gateway to customers. This guide explains what you need to know about choosing the right technology for your business when you are starting out.

Business computers

Essential for every business, computers are the workhorses on which you'll rely every day.

- A **mid-range PC** is fine for most business uses. Don't be tempted by top-of-the-range models unless you have special requirements – they're designed for geeks and gamers.
- However, a good computer is key to your business, so **don't skimp** either. Entry-level machines may develop problems and have a short lifespan.
- Budget **at least £400** for a decent business computer. That should get you a machine that won't need upgrading for about three years.
- Consider opting for a **laptop.** These are just as good as desktop computers and more flexible. Use a separate screen, keyboard and mouse when at your desk.

Find out more

Read all about business computers on the IT Donut.

Choose a business computer

What to look for:

- **Processor ('CPU').** The chip at the heart of your computer. Speed matters – look for **2.5GHz** or more.
- **RAM**. Memory that is used when you work on files. Get as much as you can afford – at least **3GB.**
- **Hard drive**. Permanent storage for your files. Get at least **500GB** – that should be plenty of room.
- **Monitor**. Bigger screens give you more room for everything. 21" will give you a nice area to work in.

"Don't be tempted by top-of-the-range models unless you have special requirements"

Choosing a broadband connection

What to look for:

- Download and upload speeds indicate how fast you can send and receive data. Look for at least 8Mbps download and 1Mbps upload.
- A data limit may restrict how much data you're allowed to send and receive in a month. Look for a limit of at least 50GB – more if lots of people will share the connection. Check what it costs if you exceed the limit.
- Most services include a router to link up all your computers.

Buying software

How to do it:

- Buying software can be confusing. Each piece of software has a licence agreement which explains how you can use it. For instance, some software is licensed for personal use only.
- If you're buying more than one or two copies of software, speak to a specialist IT supplier rather than buying boxed software. You may be able to save money with a volume licence, covering all the computers in your business.
- Software which is included with new computers can be very good value – as long as it's software you actually need.

Internet connection

A good internet connection is vital for your business. You need to be online to view websites, send emails and more.

- **Broadband internet** is the most common form of internet connection. Also called 'ADSL', it's adequate for most companies with fewer than 30 employees.
- The speed of your broadband internet can **vary dramatically** depending on where your business is located. Many broadband providers quote 'best case' speeds.
- Broadband internet costs from **£20 a month.** The cheapest packages often have tight restrictions on how much data you can download.
- **Other types of connection** are more expensive, but may also be much faster, offer guaranteed speeds, and be more reliable. Seek expert advice and shop around.

Find out more
Read about finding the right internet connection on the IT Donut.

Software

You'll probably need the following types of software:

- **Operating system software** runs from the moment you switch your computer on. It enables you to use other pieces of software. Most new computers come with an operating system like **Microsoft Windows**.
- **Office suite software**, a collection of programs allowing you to create documents, work with spreadsheets and carry out other common office tasks. The most popular is **Microsoft Office**. It costs **£200 - £400**, depending on which programs are included.
- **Internet software** is for viewing websites and sending email. The most important is a **web browser** – these are free and let you access websites. Some **email software** is free, too – or your office suite may include an email program, like **Microsoft Outlook.**
- There are **many other types of software** to consider. For instance, you may need accounting software to manage your business finances.
- Before purchasing software, assess your requirements carefully.

Find out more
Read more about buying software on the IT Donut.

Try out cloud computing

How to do it:

It's easy to **dip a toe in the world of cloud computing** to see what it's all about. Because many cloud applications are **cheap or free**, you can try them without risking much. Try signing up for **Office 365**, Microsoft's office suite in the cloud .

Buying a printer

What to look for:

- **Print speed**. This is usually quoted in pages per minute. If you expect to print frequently, get a faster printer.
- **Colour**. If you plan to print in colour, get a colour printer. Colour laser printers are more expensive than black and white.
- **Print quality**. All laser printers produce crisp text, but the quality of other prints can vary, so view sample prints before buying.
- **Running costs**. The 'cost per page' can vary vastly between printers. These ongoing costs do add up, so check before you buy.

Cloud computing

- Cloud computing is a new technology that gives you an alternative to installing software on to your own business computers.
- Cloud computing lets you **access IT resources online**, usually by logging into a special website.
- There's a **monthly fee** for cloud services, so upfront costs are less than buying software. Many services are free.
- Using cloud computing means you **don't have to maintain software** in your business. It's someone else's problem!

Find out more

Read more about cloud computing on the IT Donut.

Printers

Although it's been predicted for years, the paperless office is still a distant prospect. So you will need a good computer printer.

- **Laser printers** produce crisp text and print quickly. They cost from £60 and are best for most businesses, especially if several people will be sharing one printer.
- **Inkjet printers** are cheaper than laser printers, but use expensive ink. Although more expensive to run overall, they produce excellent colour and photographic prints.
- **All-in-one printers** combine a printer, scanner, photocopier and fax machine into one unit. They save space and are usually cheaper than buying several separate items.
- It's easier to **share a printer** between several people if it comes with a network connection. This means you can plug it straight in to your computer network.

Find out more

Read more about choosing printers on the IT Donut.

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Get started with internet security

How to do it:

- Some security software is **free**. Microsoft Security Essentials can be used on up to ten computers, and doesn't cost a penny.
- You can back data up to an **external hard drive**. Just plug it into your computer and copy all your files across.
- Consider backing your files up over the **internet**, too. For smaller amounts of data, this is free – try Windows Live SkyDrive.

Security and backups

- Many businesses do not think about their IT security until a problem strikes - and by then it is too late.
- Protect your business from viruses, spyware, hackers and other threats by running **security software** on all your computers.
- Security software runs constantly, monitoring for security threats and alerting you in the event of a problem. It may also include a **firewall** to block hacking attempts.
- **Keep your important data safe** by taking at least one additional copy of it. This is called 'backing up'. It means you won't lose important information if your hard drive fails.
- There are lots of ways to back up your data. For safety, **take two copies** – and store at least one of them away from your main computer.

Find out more

Read more about IT security on the IT Donut.

Where next?

This guide only covers key pieces of business IT that virtually every company will need. There are lots of other ways technology can help your business.

For more tips, advice and information on every aspect of choosing, buying, using and managing business IT, visit the IT Donut at www.itdonut.co.uk

The Microsoft Small Business Centre is packed with useful resources and information about Microsoft business software: http://www.microsoft. com/business/en-gb/

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