



518-831-9145

Right-Sizing Your IT Infrastructure

by Zach Nelson

A top-notch IT infrastructure is essential for any business to be competitive. Get an expert's take on how with a little planning and foresight, it's now possible to appear big while paying little.

The information technology revolution in business is as cruel as it is kind. Any one of us can operate an international business from anywhere in the world, at any time. That power comes at a price -- without a top-notch IT infrastructure, no business can hope to compete.

Fortunately, with a little planning and the foresight to spend money where it matters most, growing businesses can build the infrastructure they need without having to attempt to clone the mega-million dollar technology budgets of the S&P 500. When you stop looking at your IT as a monster in need of constant care and feeding, and start thinking of it as a critical business service, the path to streamlining your IT spending becomes clear.

Why has technology historically been so expensive? Think about the model. In the old model of IT infrastructure design and delivery, developers shipped their customers a disk and practically *dared* them to install it. Day-to-day maintenance and care were the responsibility of the end user organization, not the developers, leading to an "over the wall" design mentality that created a lot of headaches (and a lot of billable hours for on-site consultants.)

The same applied to major capital components -- servers, phone switches, you name it. That's why the dirtiest and most open secret in the technology business has long been that the cost of running an application is (at least) three to five times the cost of getting the product in the door. The up-front "savings" on a deal were simply passed back to the customer in terms of in-house support and maintenance.

The IT services shift has turned that model on its head. With new approaches such as Software as a Service (SaaS), the day-to-day support and maintenance responsibility has been shifted back to the suppliers of technology. Tired of committing headcount and consulting resources to maintain your software stack? Then don't -- turn to a full-service application provider which develops, supports, and delivers the product it sells.

This freedom goes beyond the software world. Growing businesses in need of more than a few phone lines traditionally have needed to invest in significant and complicated



518-831-9145

capital equipment to manage their voice communications. Now, even the most complex and large-scale call center environment can be operated "in the cloud" -- by dedicated service providers who not only are charged with designing and delivering intricately routed voice communications, but also keeping that service running at all times. In a very real sense, the only truly necessary component of in-house IT care and feeding is to keep that bright blue Ethernet cable to the rest of the world humming. The rest can be placed in the capable hands of the technology providers themselves.

Before you rush to outsource, offload and adopt dozens of different point solutions, however, consider this: It is still entirely possible to back yourself into a high-maintenance corner in the on-demand world by relying on a hodge-podge of point applications. Interoperability still requires customization and maintenance. Whether the IT infrastructure resides in your closet or in the cloud, tying together a laundry list of different products creates massive expense and demands specialized skills -- despite what software vendors will tell you. So look for "suites" of applications from a few vendors -- or if possible a single vendor -- that come pre-integrated.

Making a selection of a suite on the one hand over point products on the other, requires discipline as often times departments want their "own" application. If the CEO lets the departments run the company, and saddle the company with a hodge-podge of solutions, you look like a loosely affiliated group of different companies, both to yourself and to your customers. Because every CEO's job is to run the business as a unified whole, this discipline to think of your business infrastructure as an integrated suite has to be instilled from the top.

See [FastCompany .com](http://FastCompany.com)