



Improving communications in small firms

How utilising freely available, cheap and understandable technology can help make your firm more responsive, efficient and able to face up to bigger competitors

By Joe Houghton



Small firms today face pressures of competition, increased customer expectations and a constant and unremitting push to reduce costs. Bigger companies have no compunction in leveraging their advantages to gain and maintain market share, so how can a small business hope to stay competitive?

Combat the Dreaded Email SPAM

Many small firms already have much of what they need to dramatically improve efficiencies – they just don't use the features available in the software they own. Outlook – the popular email and contact management programme from Microsoft – is a good example. Everyone is plagued with spam emails – unsolicited junk email which fills up everyone's in-box and takes time and attention to identify and delete. Here are two ways to combat spam:

Identify Junk emails : While these instructions are specifically for a Windows PC, similar options are available in Apple's email programme "Mail" for Mac users. Right clicking on a message header in your in-box brings up a list of options including "Create a New Rule" (see below), and the really useful "Junk E-Mail". Selecting this gives you options to add the sender to a Blocked Senders List. Once this is done once for a sender, any further emails from them will not appear in your inbox, but in a Junk Emails folder which you can even set to be deleted automatically if you want. Get really tough and choose the option to block all emails from the sender's domain – this is normally the organisation which is sending the emails.

Create Rules to filter out unwanted emails : Setting up Rules can automatically identify and then delete emails before you ever see

them – freeing your staff up to concentrate on the valid messages from colleagues, customers and suppliers. Again, right clicking on the header in the inbox then selecting "Create a new Rule" starts a wizard which guides you through the hundreds of options to identify and then process emails coming in to your in-box. For instance, I, like most firms, am plagued by spam trying to sell CIALIS, or VIAGRA, so I set up a Rule to scan the email subject and body text for either of these words, and if such an email is identified, move it straight into the Deleted Email folder, where it is then erased next time I close down Outlook. Once the Rule has been set up, any time I collect my emails, and a VIAGRA message comes in, it doesn't even show up in my in-box – Outlook shifts it straight to the Deleted Items folder for me.

Both the above actions can be set individually on a person's PC, or by a Network Administrator if your firm is large enough to have a centrally controlled email system.

But Rules Can Do A Lot More ...

It's not just filtering out spam that can make your life easier using email Rules. You can scan emails for words, attachments – anything really, and then assign any number of actions. Emails from a specified customer can be automatically routed to a specific folder, assigned a category and then an alert message and sound put up on screen – great for automatically filing messages and for key accounts, making sure that no communication is missed for long. Forwarding to other staff or distribution lists can also be automated – emails can even be sent to the printer without any intervention. Rules are hugely powerful and quite

sophisticated office automation can be set up very quickly, once you've become familiar with the options.

And if you want to delete or stop a Rule – you can do that too, at any time.

Email on the Move

It used to be that only big firms could afford to equip their staff with the kit to collect email outside the office, but technology moves on, and there are now several options which give anyone full email access to receive and send 24 hours a day.

Blackberry is a technology which replicates all messages arriving in your desktop email onto a mobile phone sized device within seconds, enabling you to read and respond to emails wherever you are (you do need to be in an area where there is a mobile signal). You have all the normal options for ring, silent or vibrate operation, and a Blackberry device has a small but usable keyboard suitable for short – 1 or 2 line – typed responses. Typically, it's reading emails which is the big advantage – many responses will be by phone anyway, or to delete the message once read.

Smart Phones are a new breed of mobile which run Windows or a similar operating system, and can therefore send and receive emails, and also let you store, edit and read documents, spreadsheets and even presentations, as well as surf the Internet. They are normally slightly bigger than "normal" mobile phones to accommodate bigger screens and some even have small keyboards built in.

Case Study – DVD

Dave McKane runs DVD, a graphic design company based in Parkwest, Dublin 12



(www.dvd.ie.com). He's constantly on the move, meeting clients, shooting photography for jobs, liaising with suppliers and also handling duties as President of the West Dublin Chamber of Commerce, so not responding to a call or email until tomorrow just isn't an option – customers want to know today! He recently invested in a Smartphone, which gives him a mobile office in his phone. Email, voice, documents and Internet access all on one device, and with his futuristic looking Bluetooth earpiece, he doesn't even have to invest in a car-kit as the phone talks to the earpiece wirelessly. "The bluetooth earpiece means that I not only comply with best safety practice when it comes to driving I can also answer calls away from the car, even while taking photographs!"

SMS Texts

Communicating with your sales force on the road – if you need to get a short message to everyone, consider using text messages rather than calling everyone up individually, which can be time consuming and costly. There are a number of free services from the different operators, and if you check there's probably a certain number available free under your current phone tariff. You can even set up group lists on your computer and type the text message on your PC, which is then sent out to the phones of all the members of the group.

Phone Charges

How long is it since you checked with your phone supplier that the tariff you are on is the most cost-effective for your usage? Especially if you are planning to move into email and internet access on your phone, a call might just save you serious cash each month.

Broadband

Imaging turning on the TV and having to wait one or two minutes for it to connect, and having to type in an I.D. and password every time and then only getting a very slow, jerky picture. That is what dial-up access is like compared to having Broadband, which gives your computer a permanently open Internet connection. Emails appear in your in-box within seconds of being sent, downloaded files take seconds or minutes rather than hours. For most businesses these days, not having broadband is a false economy, as the delay in seeing and responding to customers and suppliers far outweighs the cost of installation. In fact, it may well work out

even cheaper to be on broadband than on a dial-up link per month, and it will certainly make your business look more professional to be able to send and receive emails and files whilst talking to your customers. Get it installed, and then make sure that your anti-virus software is set to auto-update itself, so you never have to worry about being out of date again. You should also install a good Firewall programme, which stops unwanted intruders using your broadband connection as an open electronic door into your computer and the data held there, as well as Anti-Spyware software, which locates and deletes malicious programmes which try to capture your personal passwords and financial details.

Remote Access to the Computer

Maybe you don't want to be available 24 x 7 using a Smartphone, but being able to access your office PC from any Internet connected computer can be really useful. LogMeIn (www.logmein.com) is a clever piece of software which lets you set up a fully secure, encrypted link to your home or office PC, which you can then access from any other PC in the world which has an Internet connection. Your own PC needs to be turned on and on a permanent Internet connection, so broadband or on an office network rather than a modem dialup link is required, but most businesses are at least on broadband now or at least thinking about it. You simply install a tiny program which sits on your PC, invisibly listening for a call.

Now imagine that you're visiting a client, and you forgot to bring that report or presentation, or you are taking a quick lunch in town in a café with PC Internet access for customers and want to check your emails. You connect to www.logmein.com, log in with your own I.D. and password (available free), and see a list of all your own PC's on which you've already set LogMeIn up. A further access password for each PC is required, but after a few seconds you are presented with, for instance, your office PC's screen, and you can do everything you could were you sitting at your desk – read and reply to email, edit documents, see spreadsheets, even your screensaver! The first time you do this it's a slightly surreal feeling, but it works really well and has saved my bacon more than a few times! What's more, the basic access service is free! If you also want to be able to transfer files etc, then there's a monthly subscription fee.

Wireless Access

If you have a laptop, or are buying one, make sure that you have wireless capability. Adding this into an existing laptop is as simple as buying a wireless card which will fit into a slot in the side of the laptop – some don't even stick out at all. This then gives you Internet and email access in wireless zones – many public places, café's and businesses without the need to find a network point or initiate modem dialup. Buying the Router kit to broadcast a wireless signal in your home or office costs 100 - 200 Euro and they are VERY simple to install, so as long as you already have Broadband coming in, installing wireless frees you to move anywhere with your computer within 50 – 100 metres.

Improving Small Firm Communications - In Brief

Email

Use the Junk Email filters
Use Rules to get organised

Broadband

Get it!
Make sure your anti-virus, anti-spyware & firewall software is installed and set to auto-update

Phone

Smartphones give you a mobile office
Blackberry is always on email
Text messages are good for group messaging
Checked your tariff lately?

Remote Access

LogMeIn lets you see your own PC from anywhere

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