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Ensuring the IT needs of the modern distributed workforce are being met—efficiently, effectively, and safely—is a challenge that many companies are failing to meet.

The move toward telecommuting and satellite office spaces, combined with advances in mobile technology, are placing additional strain on the IT capabilities of small to mid-sized businesses.

This paper will explain in plain, non-technical terms best practices for setting up, managing, and maintaining a remote workforce. We will examine how businesses have tried to overcome these IT challenges up to now—and what may be a more effective approach as we adapt to a more distributed working world.

## The IT Challenges of Scaling an Organization

The move toward decentralization in the traditional workplace causes a number of headaches for IT, including:

- Providing access to critical information and documents from remote locations
- Ensuring data is being shared securely
- Backing up data centrally
- Maintaining data and hardware security

Smaller companies in particular are simply not equipped to meet these challenges. They often don't have a dedicated IT department, or there may be no one to

perform IT functions at all. Instead, they rely on an informal system of workforce knowledge and support from friends and family to set up and troubleshoot their systems. All too often, the most knowledgeable person in the office becomes the de facto IT consultant, in addition to their official responsibilities.

As companies increase in size, they can afford to recruit dedicated IT staff. Often, however, the level of knowledge these new recruits possess will be limited to the level of a Helpdesk technician, with the ability to keep the office PCs and back-ups running. And, for the most part, this is good enough for a company with only one office.

But companies can run into problems when they decide to expand to multiple locations, or if employees start to work offsite. Their IT staff will most likely not have the experience in designing, implementing, and maintaining the hardware and technology infrastructure necessary to meet the IT demands of a distributed workforce.

For some, the solution seems obvious: hire a senior-level IT architect to manage this new paradigm. The new hire is an effective, although expensive, short-term solution. He or she will set about implementing a lot of new ideas—updating the IT environment, fixing the immediate issues, and spending the necessary money on ensuring the distributed workforce can work effectively.

Inevitably, however, this is a short-term fix.

Eventually, the system will be set up and running—and suddenly your company has a highly skilled and ambitious IT architect with little to do except reset passwords and recover lost data. An IT architect wants to build and problem-solve; before too long, the company has lost their IT expert as he or she has moved on to a more challenging environment, taking the IT knowledge and expertise with them.

Whether a small business has an informal or formal IT setup, when faced with the task of managing a distributed workforce, they will face the same kinds of significant challenges of finding the right person to maintain their complex technology environment.

## Why Managing a Distributed Workforce Is Hard

When tasked with managing the IT needs of workers away from a central office, there are three interrelated risks to be aware of.

### 1. Hardware and Data Security Issues

With a distributed workforce, the work environment becomes less predictable and stable. Laptops, tablets and smartphones can be used almost anywhere—on the road, in a coffee shop, or on the sofa at home. This makes the devices susceptible to loss, damage, or theft.

The valuable business information stored on these devices is also vulnerable. Backing-up data becomes more complex if the devices are not centrally located. Thieves may find—and sell or publicly release—valuable business information. Hackers can intercept unencrypted transmissions sent from these devices over Wi-Fi.

### 2. Regulations

Due to recent large data breaches, the regulations for how data is stored and transferred have become increasingly complex. Keeping up with the latest data protection laws requires someone with an understanding of your industry's legal requirements to watch for and assess legal changes as they occur.

### 3. Remote Functionality

One of the biggest IT challenges when working with external workers is ensuring they can properly access applications that run from the main office location. Although we have all become used to accessing email and the Internet from almost anywhere, many specialist applications still don't offer remote or online access.

The IT team must design a way to ensure off-site workers have access to the same functionality, at the same speed and usability, as if they were right there in the office. If an employee clicks an on-screen icon and the app takes 10 minutes to open, then that worker is at a disadvantage and can't work as effectively.

## The IT Skills Needed to Manage a Distributed Workforce

Small offices may be able to get by with an informal IT presence, but once they begin to expand to multiple workspaces or to employees working offsite, then the potential problems increase exponentially. The sheer range and complexity of managing a distributed workforce means that IT experts involved in this process need specific and up-to-date skills.

### 1. Understanding of Appropriate Technologies

Effectively providing a reliable and speedy service outside the office requires an IT team that understands how modern technology can best be applied to meet business goals.

Each level of technology requires a different skill set and a different level of understanding: the high level of the very knowledgeable people that architect the system versus the people who implement the system versus the people who maintain it.

### 2. Experience—At the Right Level

An IT architect can design and build a system that will more than adequately fulfill the task of managing your distributed workforce. They will design it and plan everything out for another expert to then take those plans and create the system. After that, you need a different level of expertise to run and maintain your network.

However, in a typical small business, you won't need the architect's skills every day. You don't need the implementation skills every day. But you need to have a technician who knows how to keep things running, and knows how to solve small, everyday problems.

For everyday IT requirements, it's enough to find one person you can trust, who is honest, reliable, has the track history of being able to implement what needs to be done on a daily basis, and who stays current with developments in technology. But it's important to have an alternative plan of action for when you need to grow your business beyond your current IT team's experience and proficiency.

## Steps Toward an IT Solution

When a business wants to expand and make significant changes in how they work, it's important that they choose the right solutions. When it comes to solving the IT challenges of managing a distributed workforce, there are three main areas to focus on.

### 1. Gap Analysis

If it's impractical for small to mid-sized companies to have a full team of IT personnel, covering every skill level and eventuality, then the ideal solution is to ensure they have access to the level of talent and equipment they need *when* they need it.

This is achieved in two ways. First, look at your internal skills; second, look at your existing hardware and software.

**Internal skills**—ensure your team is working to constantly update and hone their skills. Too many IT personnel play it safe and stick to solutions they are comfortable using. Technology moves quickly—if your IT team is applying old skills to new problems, they will cost your company time and money. If your IT team doesn't have the skills needed for something significant like supporting a move to a virtual office, look for external support. Outside IT expertise can be utilized for a small amount of time and then can provide the training and support necessary to keep the system working.

**Hardware and software**—When creating and managing a network to support a distributed workforce, it is essential to look at the equipment and software you already have. Is it being used correctly or to its full potential? Often, you'll find that equipment or software has functionality that is not being used effectively, if at all. By leveraging every advantage out of what you already own, this can save money over investing in unnecessary upgrades or additional purchases.

## 2. Take Advantage of New Technology

If you're trying to solve new problems with the same old technology solutions you've always used, then you are more likely to fall short of your needs and

expectations. Creating a system to ensure your distributed workforce can function effectively requires more advanced, more efficient technology.

Virtualization is an excellent place to start. Virtualization takes your office applications and creates a virtual version that will work out in the field. Although only "virtual," it will look and feel to the end-user exactly as if they were using the application at their office desk. Indeed, it is possible to make a whole virtual desktop so your workers feel as if their laptop screen is exactly the same as their work-based machine, with all the usual applications and functionality.

Much of what is possible in terms of remote working involves so-called "cloud" technologies—that is, where servers, applications, and storage devices can be accessed remotely, usually over the Internet. To fully take advantage of what is possible in terms of managing your distributed workforce, you have to learn and understand the capabilities and possible advantages of the new technologies.

## How Hodgson Consulting & Solutions Can Help

IT moves at an increasingly rapid rate, and ensuring your company can keep up with the flow is a challenging proposition. However, when looking to create and manage a distributed workforce, the good news is you don't have to do the hard work alone.

Hodgson Consulting are the experts at helping small companies like yours make large leaps in productivity and performance using information technology. They know how important it is to match the right skills to the right job, and they can provide you with a team of IT specialists that cover all the bases.

So if you need the skills of an IT architect for a limited period, then they can supply a professional with experience in setting up systems to support a remote workforce. If you need a full team to design, manage, monitor, and troubleshoot a complete network, they can provide that too.

With the support of Hodgson Consulting, companies have access to top-level IT expertise and support, allowing them to improve performance and efficiency at a fraction of the cost of running a large in-house IT department. Hodgson Consulting can confidently prepare your company for the future rather than thinking only of your present needs and requirements. With Hodgson Consulting, you have access to a complete IT solution, whatever your needs may be for now and tomorrow.