The Modern Office includes online collaboration, convenience of the cloud, security, mobile devices and BYOD to work. This e-book highlights tips, trends and how to navigate these new tools that bring agility to the workplace.
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What is the “Modern Office”? 

The revolutionary advances in the communications and technology are transforming our notion of what an office is.

An “office” used to mean a stationary, physical location with specific areas for employees to do their jobs. Every work area had a computer and a phone, and for the company to flourish, employees had to come to work every day, and perform their tasks at their particular workspaces.

Even communications to the company’s external contacts (clients, prospects and suppliers) emanated necessarily from the central office location. Calls came in to a receptionist and were re-directed to the appropriate parties. Similarly, faxes were sent out and received by the office fax machine.

Technology was not very well integrated. Voice communications had an infrastructure, as did data communications, and the fax line was also a separate technology.

But over the last couple of decades, things changed completely. Email meant every employee had his or her own line of written communication with everyone – whether they were fellow employees or external contacts (including friends and family!). Data and voice communications began to converge onto the same network, and the advent of mobile computing transformed the notion of using only brick-and-mortar offices inside which all commerce could take place.

The planning, implementation and maintenance of the modern office’s technology infrastructure can be a daunting task, and in many cases, companies are hesitant to embrace some technologies that could provide very tangible benefits in terms of cost savings and increased productivity.

It doesn’t need to be that way. The technology is readily affordable, even for smaller enterprises, as is the expertise to adopt the new tools into the business processes. This e-book will outline some of the ways your business can enjoy the benefits of a truly “modern office”.

Technology and the Modern Office
Technology Needs for 2015

Here are some of the technology “Must Haves” in 2015 to transform your business into the “Modern Office”:

Converged Data and Voice Communications
Simplicity is important, and it just makes sense to get your company’s voice and data onto the same network.

Broadband Internet Access
The costs for high-speed, reliable broadband internet access have been coming down for years. This will be a key component to enable your office to break outside the physical walls, and pave the way for cloud services as well.

Data Protection and Backup
The amount of data your business gathers is constantly growing, as is its importance to your business growth (and survival). You need protection from hackers and malware, and you need a plan to automatically back up your crucial data to a secure offsite location.

Make Technology Planning Part of Your Business Plan
Like it or not, technology is here to stay and it is inextricably linked to your business processes. This is a good thing, but technology needs to figure into the strategic planning for your business to contribute successfully to reaching your goals.

Is your business ready to be a “Modern Office”? At left are some key components to an office that is prepared to break out of the confines of the old office paradigm. Some of these things you may already be doing, but some of these things may be a daring departure from the way your business operates today. A business that has taken the four steps shown here has the groundwork to deploy additional powerful technologies available now, and very likely, technologies that will be emerging.
Building an IT Infrastructure for mobile office

Today’s modern office uses an IT infrastructure that isn’t limited to a “brick and mortar” workspace. To create an infrastructure to handle the demands of today’s mobile-enabled workers, certain factors must be taken into consideration.

Technology must work across multiple platforms
Your workers will be accessing the company’s IT assets (data and applications) via a variety of devices, from a variety of physical locations. This reality impacts the choices for applications, and the systems that run them. Will those assets be located in the home office? Will they be in the cloud? Does your company have internet access with adequate bandwidth and redundancy to support cloud computing?

The users’ experience should be equally productive regardless of their devices or where they are – which means, in a lot of cases, their pathways to company IT assets may involve third party infrastructures that the company cannot control. If data throughput speeds cannot be guaranteed in these cases, the security of the data still must be guaranteed.

If workers are going to mobile, be prepared to provide support remotely

Providing IT support for users in an office is one thing – it can be a challenge if the network users are off premises.

Not only will there be a larger variety of devices to support, your company IT department (or IT provider) will need to use tools to remotely manage and support those devices.

The mobile office is a viable choice for many businesses. However, to ensure continued productivity and data security, the IT infrastructure must be designed to accommodate the needs of the mobile workforce and the company’s needs.
Security, Policies and the Cloud Decision

The “outside the box” nature of the modern office presents some challenges with security and management, but there are best practices to keep the level of control to which businesses have grown accustomed.

Security
When all the employees only accessed company data and assets within the office building, from company-provided devices, security was a little easier. Devices could be chosen and configured to provide sufficient security to mitigate the risk of unwanted access to company data.

Once the mobile revolution hit, it became a much more challenging landscape with regards to security. But a combination of security tools, education and policies can close the gap.

Policies and Corporate Culture
If companies have to learn to embrace the mobile computing paradigm, so do the employees. With the freedoms associated with working anywhere, any time, on any device come the responsibilities to respect the company’s security requirements.

This can be achieved with a clear company Security Policy and ongoing education about that policy, and the company’s corporate culture regarding security.

The Cloud Decision
Companies that want to take advantage of some of the benefits offered by cloud computing (agility, scalability, mobility) will also need to keep their security needs in mind when devising their cloud strategy. In general, tools and technologies should be chosen that provide a combination of ease of use, and security and management capabilities. The next chapter will discuss the resulting environment, where some assets are on premises and some are in the cloud.
Hybrid Solutions are Key

Yes, technology has transformed business and the modern workplace. But it hasn’t changed everything – to succeed, businesses still need to adhere to age-old principles of continuous improvement, customer service and sound management tactics. What changed is the tools available to accomplish this, and not every tool is a good fit for every business.

So, navigating the business through the new technological landscape means understanding the choices, and how they will benefit your particular business. The most successful businesses will have an environment that is a combination of the new and the old.

This certainly applies to the cloud, for example. Cloud computing can provide some great advantages in efficiency, agility and cost savings, but one size does not fit all in this case. Factors such as your location, current infrastructure investments, your vertical market, growth goals and even where you are in your company’s lifecycle will dictate the IT infrastructure that best suits your business.

In most cases, the result is a hybrid infrastructure, where cloud computing is used to great advantage in some areas and other areas, “traditional” on-premises IT is a better fit. As more technologies emerge, more and more parts of the business may move to the cloud, and those would be adjustments along the way. Remember, the only constant in technology, and business, is change. Understanding and embracing that core truth can help “future-proof” your business.
Consumerism Now Drives IT Decisions

Of all the changes that technology has made in the business world, this may be the most surprising. It wasn’t that long ago that all technology decisions were made exclusively by technical personnel. The reasoning was, technology is complicated, and important, so decisions about it should be left solely in the hands of those trained to deal with it.

But when a technology matures enough to become commonplace, and in the hands of everyone, it becomes a consumer-driven issue. In the business world, we call this the “consumerization” of technology.

It doesn’t really matter anymore how you feel about this trend – it’s here. Increasingly, workers are choosing the devices they use to access company network assets (data, applications) to do their work.

The upside is, people will choose devices with which they feel comfortable, and in large part, these are devices they have purchased for themselves (this is the “Bring Your Own Device”, or BYOD trend). So, this translates to a lower hardware cost for employers and, hopefully, employees who are more productive thanks to the freedoms in choosing their preferred devices.

The downside is, now companies must provide support, and address security concerns for a much wider array of devices than before. Any savings in hardware costs BYOD brings could be overshadowed by a rise in support costs, and it’s difficult to even put a cost on the possible security risks.

It’s too late to stamp the BYOD movement out, but companies can devise and implement a BYOD policy that defines which devices may be used for work, and state requirements for the applications and security measures installed on them for work purposes. There are even applications to “wipe” lost or stolen devices to prevent company data from falling into the wrong hands.

Clare Computer Solutions provides IT Consulting, Network Support, and Project Management Services.
Ten Tips to Help You Get Started Building Your Modern Office IT Infrastructure

1) Imagine – Yes, start by brainstorming how your office might be run better and smoother with technology. How would your office benefit by breaking out of the “brick and mortar” limitations. Write it down.

2) Assess – Document (thoroughly) your office’s current IT infrastructure – there are tech asset discover tools to aid in this. You can’t make it to the finish line without knowing where the starting line is.

3) Plan – Chances are, there are some gaps between your current environment and the one you brainstormed in step 2. What needs to be fixed, and what needs to be replaced. Be specific!

4) Remediate – Reconfigure or update the existing parts of the infrastructure (hardware, software or devices) that don’t need to be replaced.

5) Implement – For parts of the infrastructure that will be added, implement and test the new equipment, software or devices.

6) Train – By now, the modern office technology tools are in place, and some are unfamiliar to your employees. They need to be trained how to use them, to be productive.

7) Monitor – There’s a considerable investment in the IT at this point and there are many interactive moving parts, and they need to “watched” to ensure they continue to interact properly.

8) Manage – The data gathered from monitoring will occasionally require some changes in the environment. This may be reactive, or it may be proactive.

9) Maintain – Even though the tools may not change all the time, the world around it sure does. Operating systems and applications need to be patched, and updated, and security tools need to be updated on a regular basis.

10) Repeat – Did you think this is a one-off project? No, this is an ongoing process. It is wise to start at step 1 again every year or two, to ensure your company stays “modern” – with all the benefits that entails!
IT Consulting Matters for the 21st Century

The bottom line is this: A company that effectively uses the latest technology to make their business more agile and efficient will have a competitive edge.

If you’ve arrived to this final chapter in this e-book, you may be thinking that having a truly Modern Office may be out of reach. The gap between your current office and the ideal technology-enabled office may seem too vast.

Just as more individuals worked on their own cars in years past, but now find the modern automotive mechanisms too technology-dependent to do so, businesses may find that their existing IT staffs won’t have the skill sets needed to maintain a more integrated IT Infrastructure. The notion of hiring more IT personnel with deeper skills and experience is not an attractive one.

There is an alternative to replacing or increasing your company’s IT staff: Engage the services of an IT consulting firm.

Consultants vs. Mechanics

Not all IT services firms are true consultants. Many cling to a now outdated “breakfix” business model—that is, they are brought in to fix specific problems. Businesses will often seek to enter into a IT support relationship to get IT repairs done more quickly, and do realize some benefit when the techs are familiar with their network, over time. But it’s not a true partnership – the IT services provider only makes money when your IT infrastructure has problems. Where is their motivation to keep your network up to date and running smoothly, every day? In this model, the customer and provider have conflicting goals.

In a true consulting model, the IT consultant seeks to understand the synergy between the company’s IT infrastructure and the business plans and goals. If the company already has an IT staff, the consultant’s role is more like a Chief Information Officer (CIO), and may also fill in for skills that aren’t needed every day, such as server work, complex implementaions or IT projects.

A good IT consultant can also implement procedures to monitor, manage and maintain the IT infrastructure, and may provide remedial support, or work with existing IT staff to divide duties up with the in-house IT staff based upon skills or availability. The goal is the keep the network up and running at all times. In this paradigm, called “managed services”, the client and providers goals are neatly aligned. The IT consultant assumes some of the risk of keeping the network available.