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BUSINESS

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*The Keys to Connection:*

# A Guide to Jumpstarting Technology

*Putting a technology plan in place today will  
help ensure your growth tomorrow*

**INTRODUCTION:**

***Building Your “Technology Blueprint”***



***Technology evolves at breakneck speed, and it plays an increasingly important role in the success of all types of businesses, regardless of size.***

Any new business should include a technology blueprint as an integral part of its start-up plan; every existing business should adopt such a plan if it doesn't already have one; and all businesses should revisit their technology plans on a regular basis. This guide looks at the components to include in a technology plan, best practices for designing and implementing it, and the advantages and benefits it can provide.

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## *Creating a Technology Plan*

*The best time to develop a comprehensive technology plan is during the start-up phase of a new business, but it's never too late for any company to assay its technology needs and begin formulating a comprehensive strategy to address them now and well into the future.*

The plan must cover essential building blocks, such as the need to keep pace with rapidly expanding bandwidth requirements, but it must also include a clear vision. “The vision is the foundation you build upon,” says Desiree Navadeh, vice president of client services at Speak2Leads (S2L), a developer of lead response management tools for small and midsize businesses. The plan’s vision statement should spell out what purpose technology will serve for the business and its customers. The plan needs enough structure to move the business forward from its current phase to the next and enough flexibility to adapt to market demands.

Specifics will vary based on several factors, such as business type and industry, but every good plan should include technology and services that are:

- **Designed for change.** An advantage SMBs have over their larger competitors in the marketplace is the ability to change and react quickly to new needs and requirements. “You don’t want to lose this advantage by being stuck with proprietary or outdated technology that inhibits change,” says Doug Kobayashi, S2L’s vice president of technology. Look for technology solutions with flexible APIs (application programming interfaces), infinite customization, open source support, and a wide user base for product support and exchanging ideas.
- **Designed for growth.** Technology designed for growth should complement, shape, and enhance your business. For example, SL2 leverages the growth of its cloud partner, which enables it to add international features to its application with little development effort. Scalable bandwidth is a critical consideration here. “The bandwidth you have right now may be fine for your current needs, but with global Internet traffic projected to triple by 2016, it’s a good bet your connection could become overwhelmed in the near future,” says Terry Connell, senior vice president, sales and sales operations at Comcast Business.

*“The vision is the foundation you build upon,” says Desiree Navadeh, vice president of client services at Speak2Leads (S2L)*



- **Designed for integration.** That means looking for technology with lots of plug-ins. “As an SMB, you don’t want to spend time and money reinventing the wheel,” Kobayashi emphasizes. “The idea is to be able to plug and play into your required technology by leveraging the work others have already done.” Sticking with best-of-breed technology provides the greatest integration options; you just need to find and test the best plug-ins.

## Moving the Plan Forward as You Grow

**Businesses invest in technology in two ways:** in the products or services themselves and as enablers to support underlying business processes and value chains, says Joe Barrus, senior business transformation consultant at RE:INVENTION, Inc., a marketing and innovation consulting firm. Early-stage ventures “need to be able to minimize the cost and impact of change and be able to scale quickly if needed. This translates to lean and simple processes supported by minimal investing in enabling technology.” Barrus suggests organizing a technology plan into start-up and sustaining phases. In the startup phase:

- **Minimal investment is required,** with just enough to support expected demand; consider renting rather than purchasing by leveraging cloud infrastructure and software applications.
- **Use commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) technology wherever feasible;** invest in custom technology only where it differentiates your product or service.
- **Leverage technologies that scale quickly with growth,** especially cloud.

Once viability for your business model and a good supporting customer base have been established, your technology plan should shift to the sustaining phase. Cloud-based solutions may still represent the best option for many of your technology needs, but if you need more control over proprietary processes, change windows, regulatory oversight, or other variables, you should consider moving to private cloud or full ownership of critical infrastructure and apps, Barrus says. “Your technology

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plan now has to consider minimizing negative impact to existing customers while introducing new enhancements and innovations to support growth. Depending on your products and services, this should include a technology strategy that supports isolation of different customer segments, with the ability to move between them,” he says.

## *The Cloud Is a Game Changer*

*Historically, making sure hardware and software are kept up-to-date has been a primary responsibility of the person or department responsible for a company’s IT operations, but cloud computing is changing that dynamic by moving most of those responsibilities outside the business itself.*

Software and infrastructure residing in the cloud are maintained and updated by the cloud and/or applications providers. All that’s required to access cloud-based services is a compatible Internet-enabled device. Cloud computing has been a great equalizer for small businesses, providing them with affordable access to technology that was only available to much larger enterprises until very recently. The cloud also lowers the cost barrier when it comes to hardware and software purchasing strategies, and it shifts those outlays from capital expenditures, which must be depreciated and amortized over time, to operating expenses, which are fully deductible in the accounting period in which they are incurred.

Leveraging cloud services lets a business avoid much of the challenge that comes with managing on-premise hardware and software, freeing it to focus more time, energy, and resources on core capabilities, says Kevin O’Toole, senior vice president and general manager, new business solutions, at Comcast Business. “There is almost no limit on what businesses can do in the cloud—data back-up and storage, email and Web hosting, document sharing and collaboration, security, Web conferencing, workflow optimization, financial services, vendor management, training, marketing, and customer relationship management—the list goes on and on.”

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Cloud computing's penetration into the SMB marketplace has been slower than among enterprise organizations, but it continues apace. Only 16 percent of small businesses reported using cloud computing in a recent survey (March 2013 MYOB Business Monitor), but that was up from 14 percent a year earlier. However, almost six in 10 midsize companies are already using the cloud, according to a survey conducted by Inc. for IBM last year. Three-quarters of respondents in that survey cited "convenient, on-demand network access to a pool of configurable resources" as a benefit of cloud computing, and 58 percent singled out the ability to rapidly provide and release cloud-based solutions with minimal management effort or service-provider interaction. The MYOB survey found that small businesses using cloud computing were 106 percent more likely to have posted a revenue increase over the preceding year than businesses not using cloud.

## ***What Every Technology Plan Should Include***

***When you're putting a plan together, here are some key considerations to take into account:***

- **BYOD and BYOA.** The emergence of the bring-your-own-device and bring-your-own-app trend is "a reality that any size business needs to address," Barrus says. In fact, SMBs are probably better positioned to benefit from this trend than larger enterprises are because small and midsize businesses are less encumbered by the need to adhere to strict standardization. "The risk of data loss and intrusion goes up with BYOD/BYOA, but there is a real benefit from leveraging it as part of a company's infrastructure and software portfolio, as long as it can be properly managed," he says.

Allowing employees to use their own devices and apps can reduce capital expenditures for hardware and software, lower training costs, and increase productivity. BYOD/BYOA fosters greater flexibility and adaptability to change by putting control in the hands of employees and reducing the time it takes to introduce change into a business's operating model. However, technology plans need to address management of this trend. SMBs need to evaluate the benefits versus the security risks and network usage that come with BYOD/BYOA. At

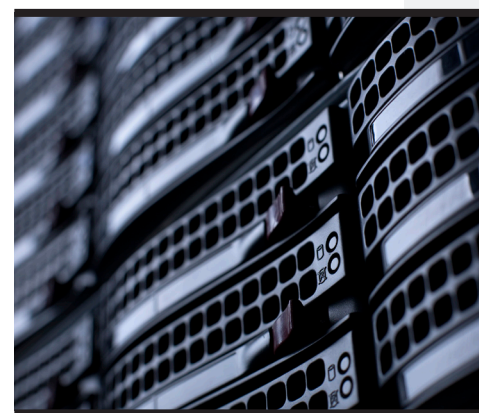
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the very least, they should develop and enforce an acceptable use policy (AUP) covering how these devices should be used in the workplace. Barrus suggests implementing software that can track and manage the devices, security software that protects them, and change management software that analyzes how the devices and apps interface and integrate with other technology in the workplace. As Connell points out, BYOD/BYOA is a major contributor to the rapidly increased bandwidth needs many SMBs are currently facing, or will be shortly. "It reinforces the importance of capacity, reliability, and scalability in choosing an Internet service provider," he says.

- **Backup/redundant backup.** Backing up irreplaceable data is critically important, but that's only half the story. Just as important is how fast and easily you can recover that data and get your business back up and running. Reliability and redundancy are the keys to a robust backup solution. Your technology plan should include a backup solution that minimizes the likelihood a restoration will be required, and that is best accomplished with the use of redundant servers/storage on your network or a cloud service. "This should be the foundation of a disaster preparedness plan," O'Toole says. "About seven in 10 U.S. small businesses have experienced data loss due to technical or human disasters, and research from Gartner and FEMA suggests that many of those businesses never recover."
- **Communication and collaboration.** Cloud-based solutions for SMBs in the area of communication and collaboration have proliferated in recent years and provide one of the best ROIs among all recent technology developments. The cost of using cloud-based file-sharing and collaboration software is exponentially lower than bringing it in-house, and the same is true of Web-based meeting and videoconferencing solutions. The resulting boost to productivity can be dramatic, and the ability to add unified communications (the integration of real-time communication services such as chat and telephony with non-real-time communication services such as voice mail, email, SMS, and fax) via the cloud can accentuate those improvements.
- **Accounting/payroll.** Among the legacy applications most resistant to change at many businesses are finance, accounting, payroll, and similar programs. As is the case in other areas of technology, there are plenty of good cloud-based alternatives, including standalone programs and many that integrate with customer relationship management (CRM) tools such as Salesforce.com and Microsoft Dynamics. While these solutions offer the same cost and scalability advantages as other types of cloud-



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based solutions, it often takes some specific impetus to prod businesses to make the switch. A logical time to make the switch is when a business develops a need to access these applications from multiple locations or when its server would have to be upgraded or replaced in order to keep them in-house.

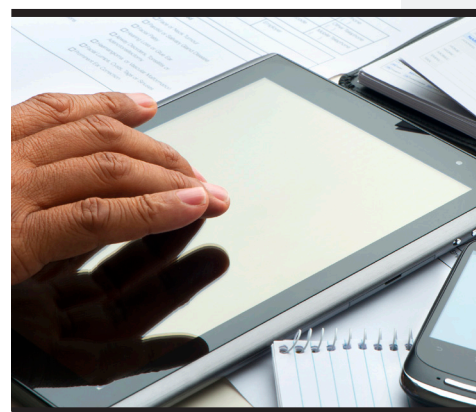
- **POS/ecommerce.** A traditional, hard-wired, point-of-sale (POS) system is expensive—anywhere from \$3,000 to \$50,000—and comes encumbered with built-in limitations. Cloud-base POS systems, many of which rely on tablets to process transactions, can be had for prices that start at about \$50 a month. The story is much the same in the ecommerce space. Cloud-based alternatives to traditional closed ecommerce systems offer increased scalability, cost savings, better security, and easier management. “Many of these tools integrate with PayPal and other online cash-management solutions,” says Adam Jorgensen, president of consulting at Pragmatic Works, which specializes in Microsoft SQL Server, a cloud-ready information platform. “They are quick and easy to deploy, and cloud integration means they store and back up transactions in a secure but accessible location.”
- **Mobile.** Having a mobile strategy that connects you to your customers is critical for SMBs because it drives word-of-mouth promotion and potentially puts you on the radar of your existing customers’ connections, says Jitendra Gupta, CEO of Punchh, a cloud-based, mobile-centric marketing platform for restaurants. “Not only can you use the data you collect from this engagement to continue offering your loyal customers better service or products, you can help them and encourage them to refer their friends. It’s the great reviews and friend-to-friend referrals on social media that builds business,” he says.

Businesses need to assess where mobility might help them most, Jorgensen says. “It might be anything from marketing and customer engagement to employee communication and collaboration. Engagement may benefit from proximity altering, push marketing, or social media integration focused on mobile consumers using coupons or other methods of mobile interaction,” he says.

Employee mobility is another important consideration in this area. As more and more employees want and/or need to work remotely, your technology plan must include solutions to enable that. Remote workers using smartphones, tablets, laptops, and other devices need secure, reliable access to your network, whether that be via WiFi on the go or a wired connection from a home office.

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- **Telephony.** Once the primary tool of business communication, telephony is giving way to other channels such as SMS and email, but it still offers important benefits and should be included in any technology plan. A telephone call is personal and immediate, and it can be more effective than a text or email because voice tone gives dimension and emotion to the spoken word. Today's unified communications systems also offer voicemail-to-email integration, remote access, unlimited mobility, and other advantages. There are a number of different options for phone systems, and you should evaluate them based not just on your current needs but on what you are likely to require in the next few years. If you plan on adding locations or need mobility functionality, a cloud-based phone system may be a good option.

***A forward-looking perspective should permeate all aspects of your technology plan, especially if you plan to grow.***

The plan should project your technology needs a minimum of three years into the future. Typically, the cloud offers the best opportunity to scale your technology development in the most cost-effective manner. So if your business or applications are not currently compatible with cloud computing, you should begin moving in this direction as soon as possible. The cloud makes IT support easier and more cost-effective, and it can give a big boost to employee productivity.

Whatever shape your technology plan ultimately takes, make sure it includes these fundamentals:

- Use of cloud technologies to minimize costs and maximize flexibility and adaptability to change.
- Use of change-management technologies such as social collaboration tools to overcome resistance to change within the workforce.
- Use of good intelligence, analytics, and decision-support tools to predict demand trends and drive innovation.
- Built-in scalability to make sure your technology solutions will be able to grow in the most efficient and cost-effective manner, as your business grows.



*The cloud makes IT support easier and more cost-effective, and it can give a big boost to employee productivity.*



## ***Best Practices in Effective Technology Planning***

Expert sources interviewed for *The Keys to Connection: A Guide to Jumpstarting Technology* suggest a variety of best practices for SMBs in this area:

- Standardize your IT infrastructure.
- Institute capacity planning for your network and mobility.
- Maximize security of IT infrastructure and mobile devices.
- Review your technology plan regularly, and update as needed.
- Converge your business and technology strategy into a single planning process.
- Retain an in-house or outsourced technical strategist/architect even if cloud technologies eliminate the need for lower-level technical resources.
- Choose best-of-breed technology providers, especially in the areas most important to your business goals.



*Patrick King, Founder  
& CEO, Imagine*

**CASE STUDY:**

## ***Building Your “Technology Blueprint”***

***Imagine, Inc. is a national marketing firm headquartered in Manassas, Virginia, with expanding offices in Chicago and San Diego.***

The firm is highly dependent on technology, including project management software, cloud-based CRM, and apps for collaboration, communication, and file sharing. Founder and CEO Patrick King says he wouldn't dream of trying to run his business without a solid technology plan in place. “It's hard to see any reason why it wouldn't be vital for any company to have a technology plan. For modern business, it's really the backbone of communication,” he says.

Based on his own experience, including the recent rebranding of his company, which used to be called ImagineDesign, King says three things are most important in creating a technology plan: reliability, minimalism, and flexibility.



## *Expectations for performance*

“Outages are a deal-breaker for us. An hour of downtime with any piece of our communications technology means a loss of hundreds of dollars, at the very least,” he says. “Each component we purchase has to perform as advertised, and I don’t have much patience for those that don’t.” Reliable, high-speed Internet and phone service are central to this aspect of Imagine’s technology plan, and King relies on Comcast Premium Internet with a 27Mbps/7Mbps connection for Imagine’s network backbone and Comcast Business VoiceEdge for cloud-based and unified communications services.

Stressing minimalism in his technology plan helps King keep costs down and employee productivity up. “Software and devices that have a ton of unnecessary bells and whistles often result in unnecessary costs,” he says. “The learning curve is longer, and if the extra features don’t add value to our core activities, the time spent learning them is just lost productivity.”

Flexibility also equates to scalability in Imagine’s technology plan. “While technology is best when it’s simple, it must also be able to respond to the growing needs of our business. Basecamp, project management software from 37Signals, is an example of a product that does this well,” he says. “It’s simple, but it provides everything you need and can grow with your business.”

Imagine has increased its reliance on cloud-based solutions and, with team members in different parts of the country, mobile devices. King has been pleased with the results and with the effectiveness of his planning. “The more evolved and thought-out a technology plan is, the more competitive a company can become,” he says. “With the rise of digital marketing, any business without a technology plan essentially ceases to exist.”



*While technology is best when it's simple, it must also be able to respond to the growing needs of our business.*





## *Kick Your Communications into a Higher Gear*

*Any technology plan needs to account for communications and collaboration.*

If you're looking to create a strong communications backbone or take your infrastructure to the next level, Comcast Business offers a wide range of scalable Internet, voice, TV, and support tools and resources to help your business succeed—and grow.

- **Internet.** When it comes to the Internet, it's all about speed. Comcast Business Internet features downloads up to 100Mbps and uploads up to 20Mbps. In addition, the service offers hosted Microsoft Exchange, including Outlook email and SharePoint; flexible Web hosting options to build and promote a website; and, for customers with more demanding data requirements, Comcast Business also offers Ethernet services.

- **Voice.** Crystal-clear phone service should be your minimum expectation, but that's just the beginning of what Comcast Business offers. Anywhere access to calls and voicemail; cost-effective managed voice service; unlimited inbound, local, and domestic long distance; PRI Trunk solutions; 24/7 support; and more—it's all part of the Comcast Business Voice experience.

Looking for a completely managed voice solution? Comcast Business VoiceEdge lets you focus on your business instead of your business communications. With the VoiceEdge high-definition, cloud-based phone service, all voice communications services are managed by Comcast Business, which minimizes capital expenditures, eliminates the need to manage and maintain a premise-based PBX or Key System, and ensures your voice communications system has the latest upgrades and technology. And with features like “Be Anywhere,” which ensures calls are not missed, and Remote Office, which allows users to utilize their phone number and profile features from anywhere they work, you and your people are never out of communication.

- **TV.** With Comcast Business TV, you can choose the package that best fits your needs and adds the most value for your business. Comcast Business offers content geared to offices and waiting rooms, bars and restaurants, fitness centers, and hotels. Comcast Business TV offers competitively priced packages including popular local broadcast and cable networks; news, business, general sports, weather, family, and more; and league-specific sports channels covering the NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL.
- **Support.** Comcast Business understands that you can't waste precious resources troubleshooting IT issues when business is piling up. To that end, Comcast Business created Signature Support, an advanced tech support solution tailored for small business. Signature Support resolves issues before they become problems by constantly monitoring the health of your systems and networks so they continue to run at peak performance, while its cloud-based data back-up secures your critical documents. The service even covers your tech gear from unexpected and accidental damage. In short, Comcast Business Signature Support offers 24/7 expert tech support to keep your computers, networks, servers, and other technology constantly up and running.

*Comcast Business understands that you can't waste precious resources troubleshooting IT issues when business is piling up.*



- Cloud Applications.** The Upware Marketplace from Comcast Business offers some of the best-in-class cloud applications you can use. The Upware Marketplace provides solutions from such well-known providers as: Soonr Workplace, the leading secure, online file sharing and collaboration service; Box, a secure, scalable content-sharing and collaboration platform; Hightail, a simple, safe, and convenient content-sharing solution; hosted Microsoft Exchange from Comcast Business, the most powerful set of cloud-based productivity tools that will unlock the potential of your business; data backup from MozyPro (desktop and server), Carbonite Business, and Digital Safe; data security from market leaders Norton and Websense; and anyone, anywhere online collaboration tools from Cisco WebEx Meeting Center.

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