

Upgrading Mobile Technology

A smart investment for more efficient and faster business operations

By Ramon Ray

It is important to periodically update your technology to enable your business to produce more in less time. Upgrading your mobile devices is one aspect of this technology refreshment that you should not ignore.

Your 4-year-old cell phone is no competition for the cell phones of today, which can receive faxes, take photos, and download e-mail. The pagers you have become accustomed to for decades are dinosaurs compared to the multitasking gizmos on the market now. Electronic organizers of the early 1990s could only dream of wireless internet access and running digital presentations like today's PDAs can.

Although mobile technology is something to be embraced, don't rush to improve your technology without a clear plan of why you want to upgrade and what the return on investment will be for your enhancement. In fact, Lena L. West, founder and CEO of strategic technology consulting firm xynoMedia Technology, got rid of her cell phone because she was tired of its constant interruptions.

"I felt like everyone had access to me anytime and anywhere. It was stressful and not the best use of my time as CEO," says West, who prefers using a Dell Latitude D600 equipped with a wireless network card. "Since mobile computing is a part of the technology plans we develop for our clients, we had to create an alternate strategy to fill our internal communication gap. So I opted for wireless access via my laptop."

Mobile technology allows West to make quicker, more informed decisions with less red tape, which translates into a higher return on investment for her clients. "If I'm not in the office, my assistant can get files to me as needed or I'm able to approve a proposal on the fly," says West.

Upgrade: Wireless Computing for Enhanced Customer Service

If you purchased a PDA or notebook computer a few years ago, wireless connectivity is not built into it. Upgrading to a wirelessly enabled notebook or PDA will let you respond more quickly. If you have employees -- sales staff, support technicians, or others -- who are on the road often, wireless connectivity will enable them to access customer, sales, inventory, or other databases from almost anywhere.

In the office, your employees are no longer tethered to their desks, but can hold impromptu meetings with the convenience of having their data with them, wirelessly connected to the network. Your business will save time and money and gain a large increase in efficiency as you and your staff can communicate with increased flexibility.

As you upgrade your mobile hardware, you might also have to invest in software to connect your mobile workforce to your back-office data. Just having Internet access on your PDA might not be enough if your sales team cannot remotely enter customer information into your customer database.

Upgrade: Get E-mail from Anywhere

Franklin Madison, technology program director for the Industrial and Technology Assistance Corp., is addicted to his BlackBerry 7100t, made by Research In Motion. The BlackBerry 7100 series provides an integrated phone, wireless e-mail, and data exchange. The device gives Madison the ability to access his e-mail from anywhere. Furthermore, the earpiece speaker is wirelessly connected via Bluetooth -- no wires to get in the way.

"The BlackBerry does one thing well -- e-mail," says Madison. His BlackBerry allowed him to reply to his office when a client was closing on some much needed venture capital. "I was on the road for a technology conference and I was in an area where my cell phone service was sporadic," recalls Madison. "Since the BlackBerry operates on several data frequencies, I was able to send critical e-mails to my client and my office despite the lack of phone service." For those who must have access to e-mail, upgrading to a device that allows you to send and receive e-mail whenever and wherever should be considered.

Upgrade: Reduce the number of devices you carry

If you find yourself digging into your purse to grab a cell phone while juggling your PDA in one hand and typing an e-mail with your notebook computer precariously balanced on your knee, it's time to consider upgrading your "gadget soup" of devices and getting one device that can handle several tasks.

PalmOne's Treo, Research In Motion's BlackBerry, and Danger's Sidekick come with built-in keyboards and feature phone, PDA, and Web/e-mail capabilities. Integrated devices reduce your dependence on multiple power and recharging sources. They also allow you to have only one device to synchronize with your computer, and make you more productive.

Upgrade: Speed and Memory

Some of you may remember the bulky Handspring Visors of a few years ago with 2MB of memory. The latest Palm Tungsten T5 has 256MB of memory built into it. More memory and a faster processor enable your mobile technology -- be it a PDA or phone -- to store and process more programs and data. As you use more data and work with more mobile applications, upgrading to more memory and a faster processor will increase your productivity.

Upgrade: Get connected faster and more reliably

Larry Johnson, a graphic designer at Pfizer, says that his most important upgrade has been his "press to talk" digital cell phone from Nextel, which enables him to reach colleagues who are often unreachable using a traditional analog phone. "The Direct Connect walkie-talkie allows me to connect with another Nextel user anywhere in the country and across borders," says Johnson. Only a few years ago, Johnson would dial a colleague's number and cross his fingers -- wondering if the call would go through. With his new cell phone's walkie-talkie feature, he presses one button and talks.

You've seen from these examples that a wireless network can make your business more productive and enhance your customer service.

Here are a few tips on how to upgrade wisely:

- Take inventory of the technology you already have. See what equipment you can use with a few modifications or upgrades. If your technology is too old, you will have to get rid of it and buy new hardware.
- Software is important. Make sure that you can access the applications and database in your office from your mobile devices.
- Security is important -- especially for wireless users. Hackers are always on the prowl for wireless networks that are not secure. Work with a technology consultant so you can secure yours.
- Train your staff on how to use the new technology. Investing in technology that is not used or not used to its full potential because of a lack of user training is a waste.
- Don't upgrade for the sake of upgrading. Upgrade to solve a particular business problem. Upgrade with an intended solution in mind.

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