
Three Cost-Effective Steps to a Modern Network

Update and future-proof your network with a few smart IT investments

Unless you're a start-up and building your IT network from scratch or your organization is only a few years old, chances are good that your network could use some updating. Replacing everything with a forklift is prohibitively expensive, even if it's what your aging infrastructure actually needs. With some careful planning and smart choices, you can cost effectively modernize your network.

What users want from a network is nothing new: speed and reliability. What has changed, however, is how fast is fast enough and how much downtime is acceptable. As performance has increased and downtime has decreased, users have ushered in an era sophisticated consumer technologies in the workplace. So, your modernized network must be able to support a range of new communications technologies, such as voice and video, as well as integrate with mobile devices, particularly smartphones. The goal is to cost-effectively make your network nimble and ready for the future while supporting your business today.

1. Get fast Internet

Users expect their web pages to load instantaneously, their video streams to flow without interruption, and their emails to download attachments in a blink of an eye. For many employees, including salespeople and customer service representatives, their productivity depends on being able to exchange information over the Internet efficiently and quickly.

A speedy Internet connection can also enable several new, cost-cutting technologies that open up a world of opportunities for the smaller business. For instance, cloud computing, VoIP (voice over IP), and remote access for telecommuters won't perform as required if the Internet pipe is too small to allow all of the different types of traffic to flow quickly and smoothly.

A broadband Internet connection isn't as expensive as it used to be. Find out when your current contract with your ISP (Internet service provider) expires and negotiate a new plan, shopping around to get the best deal; some ISPs offer discounts if you switch. Don't upgrade to a faster connection until your contract expires, or you risk incurring fees.

2. Future-proof your network

Your LAN (local area network) must also be faster than ever, while also becoming more reliable and capable of handling increasing amounts of traffic. Most modern IT ecosystems include converged IP networks, which handle application data traffic, voice traffic, and video traffic. Even if you're not now using an IP-based phone system,

chances are high that your organization will eventually implement VoIP technology – and you want to be ready for it.

As you develop your annual purchase plans, choose items that will continue to support your network as your business grows. What applications will you run on your network next year? What about three years from now? Most networking gear available now will be able to support the types of traffic you're likely to run in the near future. For example, even if you're not actively planning an IPv6 network migration or a VoIP implementation, the next router you buy should be capable of running IPv6 traffic as well as provide QoS (Quality of Service) to Internet-based phone calls.

The most cost-effective way you can upgrade your network is by taking a careful, planned approach that factors in future needs as well as current requirements. This way, your organization will be prepared -- and can avoid costly rip-and-replace scenarios – to implement coming technologies, such as IPv6.

3. Go mobile

The smartphone market is booming, and people now rely on them to connect to their work email as well as their personal email account. With some planning, those same smartphones can access your organization's IP-based voice system, CRM (customer relationship management) solution, and more. Mobility is key to a modern network, but it requires opening up the network to remote access. Add a VPN (virtual private network) to your network security to allow employees to access network resources from a remote location or devices, including their smartphones, tablets, and laptops.

You can go mobile, also, by adopting cloud-computing services. Moving some part of your business to the cloud can be the most cost-effective way of acquiring certain applications, particularly for small to mid-size organizations. With a cloud-based service, you can get tailored access to enterprise-grade business applications like CRM, ERP (enterprise resource planning), and hosted IP-based PBX phone systems. Users on any Internet-connected device can access the same resources in the cloud. Many cloud providers have released apps designed for smartphones to access their applications, such as NetSuite's CRM client app for the iPhone.

Your network is never static, and it requires some investment of time and money to keep it current. You don't need to jump on every technological bandwagon, but you do need to make sure your network can support the new technologies that will help your business thrive.

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