

iQ Rating

This issue:

When iQ asked a handful of industry experts to identify this year's top five strategic IT issues, it revealed some depressingly familiar holes in strategy, plus a couple of new ones...

2008's TOP 5 KEY IMPERATIVES

1 A Professional Online Image

As the world continues its rapid move online, it's essential to have a professional online image, says Tim Kimber, UK Product Manager for Microsoft Office Live, but a surprising number of firms are still remiss in this area.

"Firms that don't have professional websites or business email addresses will get left behind, losing business and marketing opportunities. With many customers doing most of their initial research for new purchases online, having a professional website and business email is a prerequisite just to participate. And if you don't have these, customers will want to know why."

Professional need not mean complex or expensive, and you can set up a simple website and some business email addresses in a single evening. But it's more important than ever to update regularly, because displaying last month's special offers or last year's catalogue will just make you look slipshod.

With the rise of the web, more and more customers no longer find it acceptable to be kept in the dark about issues like orders, payments, stock levels, and so on, adds Doug Wilson, CEO of software vendor HoundDog. "Firms should use the web to provide this information, keeping customers better informed in a way that's more convenient and accessible to them – and cutting their own customer service costs into the bargain", says Wilson.

2 A Strong Business Case

Do your IT systems make or cost you money? Too many businesses don't know because they're still not making a proper business case for their IT decisions, says Jo Sedley-Burke, Business Development Director at independent IT services company Sovereign Business Integration.

"Just because another organisation is using a piece of technology doesn't mean it will work for you. Without a business case for IT investment, firms will suffer continued unmanaged spend and they won't enjoy the growth that they wrongly assumed would follow." Once a new system is in place, says Martin Brommell, Regional Director of BT Local Business, companies must set targets to measure return on investment. Only then, he says, will you know whether your purchasing decision was the right one.

The same rigour should be applied to existing contracts, says Mark MacGregor, CEO of Connect Support Services: "Hardware costs have fallen dramatically in recent years but the rest of the IT budget has remained fairly constant" (and in some cases risen. Ed.).

"So review all your IT related contracts to see if you can reduce the costs of your support, communications, anti-spam/anti-virus services and (largely) unnecessary hardware maintenance contracts." If you buy new technology, make sure you get the full benefit, MacGregor adds. "For example, Microsoft Small Business Server comes bundled with SharePoint, but many firms never use this, even though it would allow them to work on documents simultaneously, share team calendars, create a company-wide intranet, and improve remote working."



iQQ: Which shape completes the sequence?



3 Expect the Worst

From terrorism to freak weather events, the threat of disaster seems to loom ever larger, yet many firms are failing to take even the simplest precautions. "Four out of ten SMEs don't back up their data at all, and most of the rest use outdated back-up tapes", he says. "Switching to online back-up is a much safer option. New technology means it won't clog up your bandwidth, and prices are falling fast so the costs will be minimal."

Have a business continuity plan that assesses the business's reliance on different aspects of IT – and other services – and that ensures it can still function in the event of a disaster. Depending on the attached value and the firm's depth of pocket, disaster recovery (DR) provision can range from basic back-up to full-mirroring and alternative accommodation.

A cheaper alternative to the latter, says Joe Sluys, Director of solutions provider Sentronex, is to enable staff to work from home via broadband links, as long as the company's core systems and data are available from an alternative site. "We've seen evidence of larger organisations beginning to seek assurance that contingency processes are in place, so DR is not only a method of insurance but also a tool for closing contracts," Sluys adds.

4 The Big Green Monster

Moral pressure from customers and staff, rising energy costs, and the increasing likelihood of legislation – not to mention a growing number of bottom-line incentives – should all be spurring firms into being greener IT users.

Start with simple policy changes, says Caroline Russell, Insight's Business Improvement Co-ordinator; double-sided printing, "think before you print" slogans on emails, utilising power-saving features on hardware and switching it off at night. "Enabling remote working can significantly cut travelling and commuting, saving both time and CO₂ emissions."

Rationalising servers or hard disks can also help.

"Over five years, one RAID drive can produce 32 tons of CO₂ emissions per usable terabyte, if you include all the overheads for cooling, humidification, uninterruptible power supply and power distribution", says Andy Hardy, International Sales Director with storage vendor, Compellent. "Technologies like thin provisioning, automated tiered storage, and virtualisation will reduce the number and the kind of disk drives needed and cut the carbon footprint."

When buying new hardware, ask how power-efficient it is, just as you would with a new washing machine. And consider how you dispose of old equipment.

After refurbishment and removal of data, old PCs can be donated to charity or even sold. According to equipment disposal specialist Remploy e-cycle, refurbished machines can fetch up to £150, around 75% of which is returned to the original owner.

5 Secure, Flexible Working

Chaining staff to their desks won't make them more productive. "In the UK we work longer hours than the rest of Europe but our productivity levels are actually lower", says Brommell. The solution, he argues, is flexibility, such as flexi-time, tele-commuting, and home-working to make best use of staff time.

Making your workforce location-independent can bring you closer to customers and reduce your capital expenditure, as well as boost productivity, says Steve Johnson, UK channel manager at networking vendor 3Com. But it can also leave big holes in your data security. "The perimeter of the network has blurred completely as a result of the drive for mobility", says Johnson.

"It's not enough to control who has access to your building. Organisations must ensure that only those who are checked, safe, and authorised have access to their systems; that they only have access to the services they're permitted to use; and that all this can be managed effectively with a minimum of operational expense.

"This requires a multi-layered approach to ICT security and protection."

