TECHNOLOGY HORIZONS

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Aligning Information Technology With Business Strategy

Volume 12 Number 1

Sticking with the Best

Cedar Hill Golf and Country Club decides to try another outsourced IT provider — and quickly returns to Atlantic-IT.net. Here's why.

"The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence."

It's an old proverb that neatly sums up a truth about human nature. Whether in our personal lives or in business, it's natural to think that another situation is better than the one we have. Sometimes, however, we discover that what we have is actually far better than the alternative.

Cedar Hill Country Golf and Club found that to be the case when it comes to IT support. The club was a longtime client of Atlantic-IT.net, but decided to look at other options when its contract came up for renewal. One company had been trying to win the club's business for several years, so management decided to give them a try.

"Like any company, we occasionally get quotes from other suppliers, just to see what else is out there," said Pam Figueroa, Controller, Cedar Hill Golf and Country Club. "One company offered us something that sounded good — an all-inclusive package at a little bit lower price. That's why we went with them, but we were with them for less than a year. We were not satisfied with the service, so we decided to go back to Atlantic-IT.net."

continued on page 2

Sticking with the Best

continued from page 1

Cost versus Value

The market for outsourced IT services is highly competitive, with many companies promising to provide prompt, professional support. However, delivering that support requires not only technical knowledge but a high level of customer service and a disciplined approach. As Cedar Hill soon learned, some providers aren't up to the task.

"The other company's service was not anywhere near what Atlantic-IT.net offers," Figueroa said. "Sometimes when we called for support we wouldn't be able to get anybody on the phone. Sometimes we would get people on the phone who didn't know what they were talking about. I know that company wasn't monitoring our systems, even though they said they were. We felt like a lot of things were falling through the cracks.

"We had two security breaches with viruses coming into our systems. They said, 'You don't have very good virus controls,' but we wondered why they would let us operate like that. That's something Atlantic-IT.net would never do. And by the time we added up all the extra expenses, we figured we were paying about $400 more a month than we had been paying with Atlantic-IT.net — and getting a lot less service."

Understanding Business Needs

Located in Livingston, N.J., Cedar Hill is a private club that was founded in 1921. The club is family friendly with a relaxed dress code and a variety of membership opportunities. Like most clubs, Cedar Hill relies upon its computer systems for point-of-sale and back-office functions. But with just a few computers and about 25 end-users, the club cannot justify hiring an employee to handle IT support.

Atlantic-IT.net fills that role for the club. Experienced engineers and technicians monitor and manage the club's systems and keep them up-to-date. Should a problem arise, expert help is always available through the Atlantic-IT.net Support Center.

"They support all of our technology, including our point-of-sale systems. I feel that they understand our needs," said Figueroa. "When we went with the other company, we were told we would be able to get service 24x7. But they failed to tell us that they only have minimum support staff on call after 6:00 in the evening. We're a country club. Some of our busiest times are on the weekends and in the evening. We need to be able to call our IT company anytime, and we get that with Atlantic-IT.net."

Comfort Level

Figueroa says that the club was already using Atlantic-IT.net when she came on board. Although she wasn't involved in the initial decision, she was part of the decision to stay with Atlantic-IT.net when the club's first contract came up for renewal.

"In the past I had worked with smaller IT support companies. So, for me, having a company that's a little bit bigger with more access and more people is really the best," she said. "Over the years we've seen Atlantic-IT.net evolve as well — they're able to handle a lot more without coming out onsite, for example.

"I have a big comfort level with them. We needed a new server and were comfortable with them helping us through that. We didn't reach out to anybody else or get any other quotes."

It's important in business to take a look at what's available and seize new opportunities when appropriate. At the same time, care should be taken when evaluating outsourced IT providers.

"Sometimes change is good. Sometimes it's not. You live and learn," Figueroa said. "I think with IT solutions, you really need to be consistent. When somebody has a long history with you, it makes a big difference."

"By the time we added up all the extra expenses, we figured we were paying about $400 more a month than we had been paying with Atlantic-IT.net — and getting a lot less service."

News Briefs

Windows 10 Adoption Accelerating

Worldwide migration to Windows 10 is proceeding rapidly, with analysts from Gartner, Inc. predicting it will be adopted at a faster rate than any previous version of the Microsoft operating system.

Gartner predicts that 50 percent of enterprises will have started Windows 10 deployments by January 2017, with an eye to completing organization-wide migrations by 2019. That is about six months ahead of the pace set by Windows 7, which was previously the fastest upgrade.

Microsoft released Windows 10 in July 2015. Gartner says adoption was sparked by pent-up demand for an OS that would support tablets and 2-in-1 devices following a lukewarm reception to the Windows 8 rollout in 2012. Gartner noted that users didn't care for some key revisions in Windows 8 such as colorful "tiles" loaded with live information, or the removal of the start button at the bottom left of the screen.

By Microsoft's own count, only about 110 million of 1.5 billion Windows users worldwide currently run the latest available version, with many holdouts sticking with Windows 7 or the generations-old Windows XP.

SMBs Cite Lack of Security Resources

Small to midsized businesses (SMBs) report that they lack the resources necessary to protect themselves against a range of security threats, according to a new study by Wakefield Research. Budgetary and staffing constraints were most frequently cited for security shortcomings.

At most SMBs, IT staff must juggle security along with their other IT responsibilities. This leaves employees stretched thin and unable to devote the necessary time to many critical cybersecurity tasks. Nearly 60 percent of respondents think their business is more prone to cyberattacks because they have too few resources for maintaining their defenses.

Overall, 81 percent plan to increase their annual IT security budget for 2016, by an average of 22 percent. Respondents are also open to other strategies for improvement, with 81 percent agreeing that an outsourced IT solution, including security, would increase their ability to address important areas of their business.

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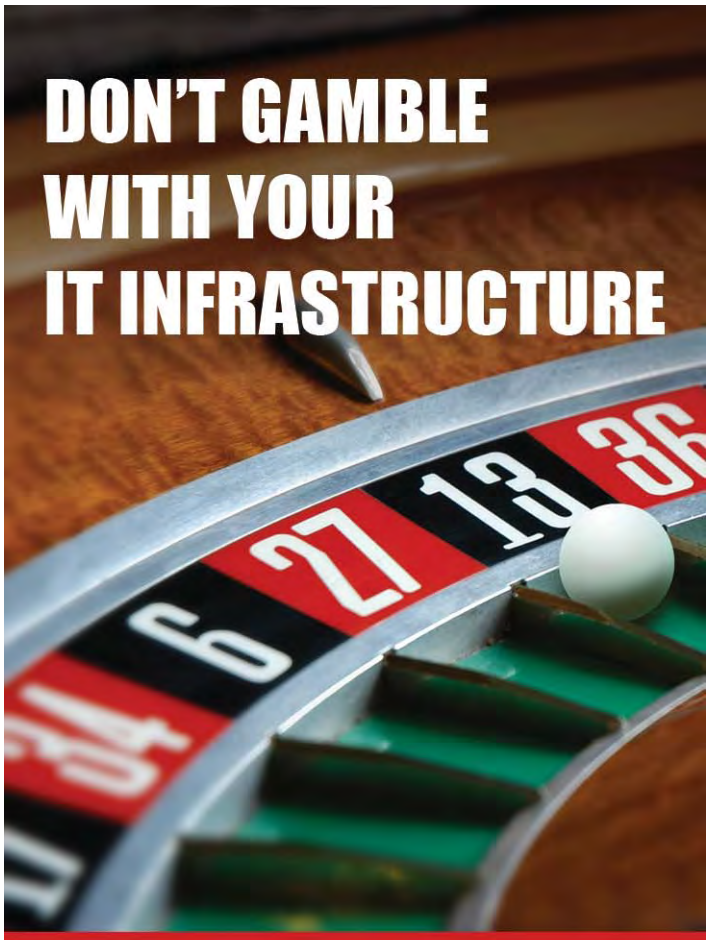

Businesses today rely upon underlying technology resources to conduct operations. Organizations without a strategic technology plan are gambling that their IT infrastructure won't let them down. That could turn into a seriously bad bet.

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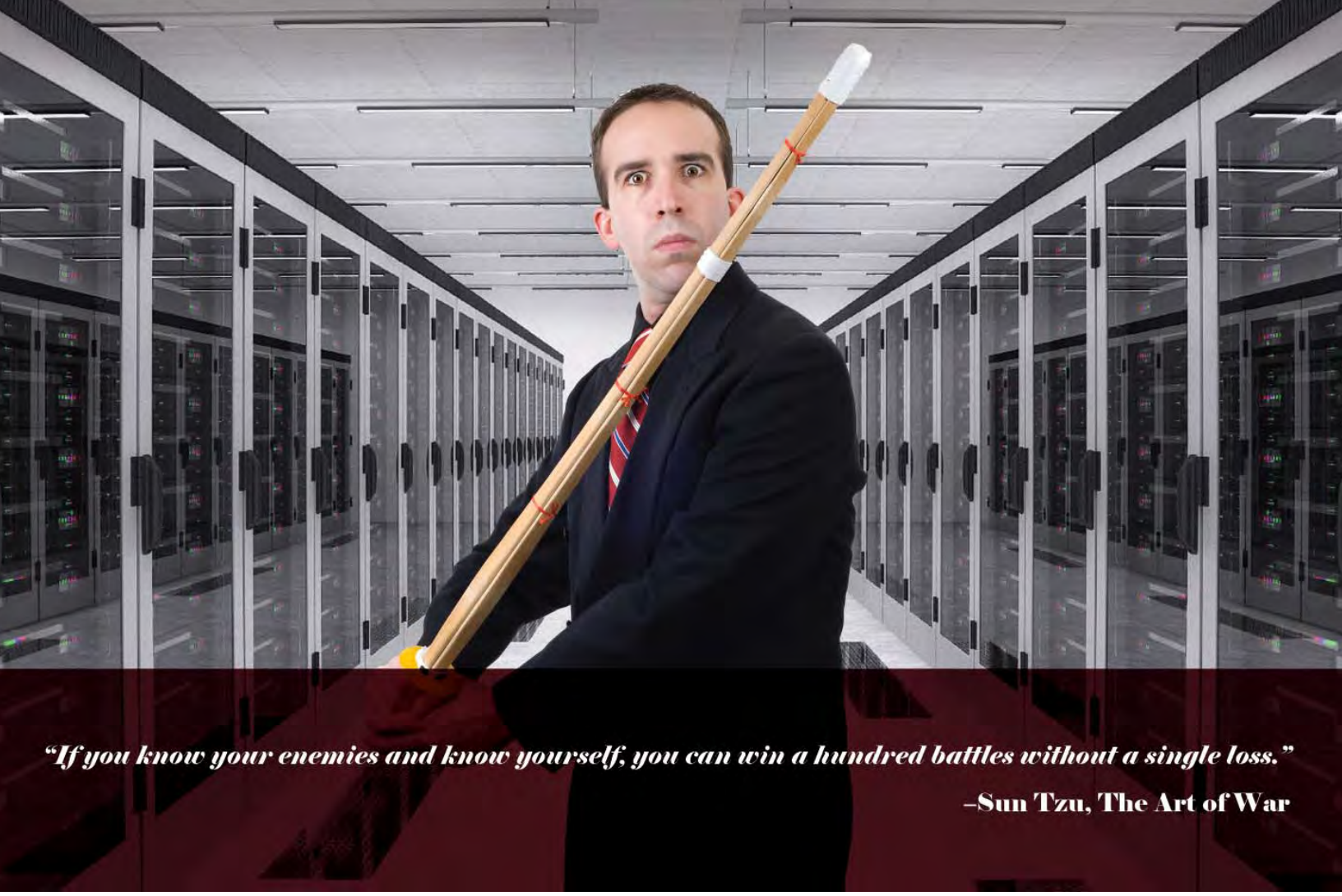


The Art of Network Security

Security assessments can help organizations win the war against cyberattacks by identifying and remediating vulnerabilities.

Sometime in the sixth century B.C., Chinese general Sun Tzu wrote one of the most successful books on military strategy. In it, he states that strong leadership and sound planning can result in victory over a superior force. Conversely, he explains that overconfidence can lead to stunning defeat.

The Art of War offers sage advice for organizations battling IT security threats. General Sun understood that assessing risks and developing a plan of attack are more important than engaging the enemy head on. He also warned that failing to identify your own weaknesses can give your opponent the opportunity to gain the upper hand.

Hackers operate by exploiting network vulnerabilities, and the number of vulnerabilities that threaten any given organization continues to grow exponentially. In this climate, organizations must start by gaining greater visibility into the type and number of threats they are facing. A comprehensive security assessment can help organizations identify vulnerabilities, prioritize actions and move more quickly to mitigate those risks.

"The art of war is of vital importance."

General Sun recognized that war exacts a high cost, both in human and monetary terms. As a result, *The Art of War* em-

phasizes the importance of understanding how the enemy operates in order to win the war while avoiding the high cost of direct conflict insofar as possible.

The cost of a network security breach can also be substantial. According to the Ponemon Institute, the average total cost of a data breach reached $3.8 million in 2015, a 23 percent increase over 2013. Even where sensitive data is not compromised, organizations can experience costly downtime, lost reputation and reduced morale.

In the past, network security depended upon a hardened perimeter to keep intruders outside of the network boundaries. Today, networks have become more fluid, extending to growing numbers of remote and mobile users and cloud-based applications. The so-called "attack surface" has grown dramatically, with numerous points where an intruder might be able to penetrate the network.

This makes it increasingly difficult for organizations to examine every avenue for network access as a potential security gap. Vulnerability assessments, penetration tests and regulatory compliance audits are key to the development of a sound security strategy.

"If the enemy is superior in strength, evade him."

Vulnerability assessments involve running internal and external scan on an organization's network to find known weaknesses. Security experts recommend using multiple, professional-grade tools — a scan using off-the-shelf shareware won't find very much and may have a 40 percent false positive rate. Using a variety of tools and techniques enables IT teams to validate the results and minimize false positives.

Depending upon the size of the network, a vulnerability assessment can take anywhere from a couple of hours to a couple of days to complete. But the real work takes place before and after the scan itself. Prior to the scan organizations should inventory the IT infrastructure and tailor the scan to target potential vulnerabilities.

When the scan is complete, a detailed report is generated that includes a definition of the found vulnerabilities, how they might be exploited, and how that might affect the organization's security posture. Using that report, security experts can develop a plan that shows how to remediate the vulnerabilities.

"Seizing the enemy without fighting is the most skillful."

Penetration tests utilize some of the same processes as a vulnerability assessment validation, but go much deeper. The information gathered is used to launch strategic attacks — the types of attacks hackers would launch based upon their eavesdropping over a period of time. The goal is to gain the perspective of what a hacker would see and what the hacker could do to penetrate the network.

The penetration testing report is focused on the systems that the IT team was actually able to penetrate. It is often very eye-opening. It helps organizations understand their level of exposure and what needs to be done to reduce that exposure.

Penetration testing is used to determine the effectiveness of the technical, operational and physical controls in place in the organization, as well as the organization's vulnerability to a particular threat. As such, penetration testing is particularly important for customers facing regulatory compliance audits. The internal and external scan, coupled with a review of security policies, can help organizations improve their security posture, adopt compliance best practices and ultimately pass compliance audits.

"Security against defeat lies in our own hands."

A security assessment is essentially a superset of these services. It generally consists of an internal and external scan as well as an audit of all of the network and security devices in the customer's infrastructure. A primary goal is to ensure that devices and operating systems are configured such that no open, unneeded services could be exploited.

However, there remains a lot of confusion in the industry regarding security assessments, and a lot of these buzzwords are used very loosely. It is important to ensure that IT security teams have the tools and expertise to dig deeper and find the vulnerabilities that threaten the organization.

The sharing of critical applications and data with customers, suppliers, and remote and mobile workers can open up the network to malware, denial of service attacks and other malicious threats. At the same time, a growing number of federal, state and industry regulations require that organizations take measures to protect data from destruction, loss, alteration or other unauthorized use.

While every organization is at risk, there is no one-size-fits-all security solution. Because every IT environment is unique, each organization needs to understand its specific strengths and weaknesses in order to implement the right tools and policies. A thorough security assessment is an important first step in the development of a security plan.

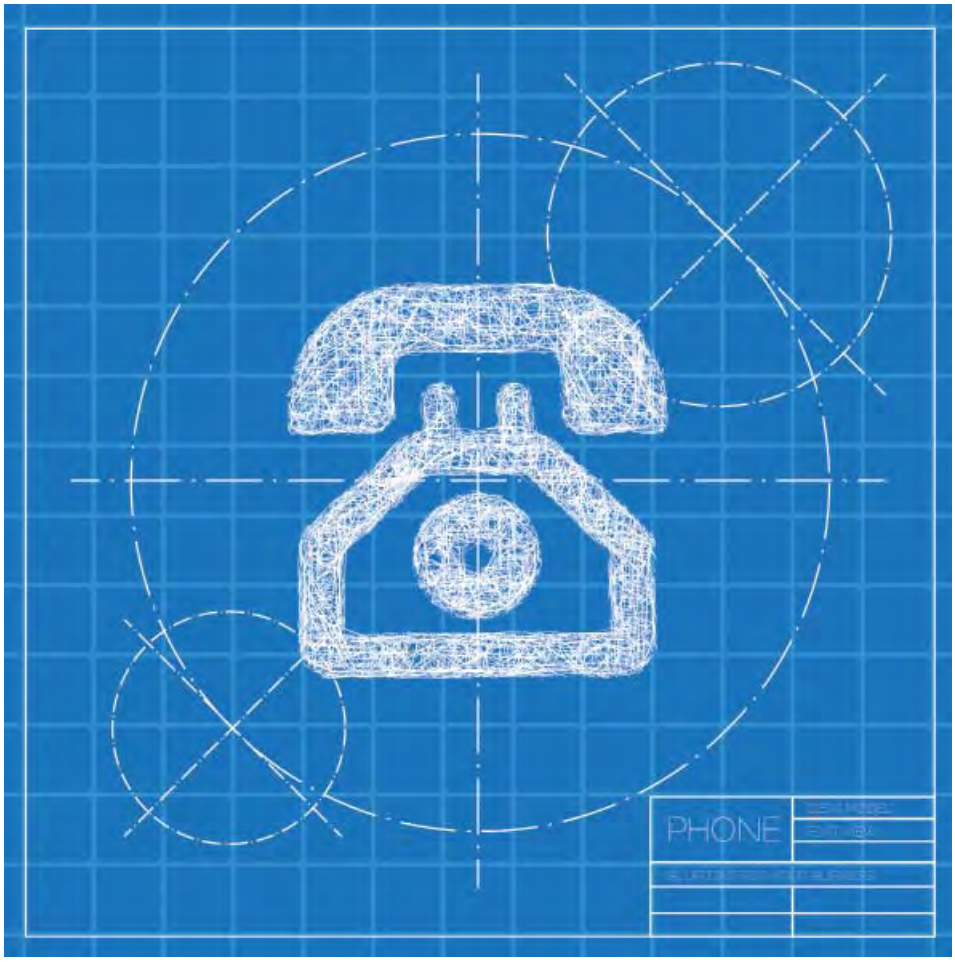
Phone Planning

Migrating to a new business phone system requires a careful, methodical approach.

While organizations of all sizes depend on email, video and social media for conveying information to both internal and external audiences, the telephone remains the undisputed champion of business communication tools. Modern IP phone systems not only deliver the immediacy and contextual clarity of voice, but serve as the foundational technology for most other digital communication channels.

That's why many organizations are making it a priority to replace aging analog systems and older VoIP systems. In a recent Hanover Research survey of small and midsized businesses, 86 percent said they plan to evaluate new phone systems within the next three years.

Migrating to a new phone system can produce undeniable business benefits, but it isn't a simple process. Because a phone system transition touches every member of the organization and can create significant network overhead, it is important to take a measured approach to migration. Following are a few best-practice guidelines for phone system evaluation and implementation.



Assemble a Team

Google searches and word-of-mouth recommendations can't provide the depth of information required to make the right decisions about a phone system. It is important to assemble a team of key stakeholders representing all areas of the organization, including management, end-users and IT. A project manager will oversee the project and help to ensure that key deadlines and benchmarks are met.

Define Business Goals

It is important to clearly identify specific objectives. These may include standardizing business units on a single platform, enhancing customer service, integrating communication channels, improving productivity, enabling mobility and more.

Define User Needs

Today's IP phone systems offer a spectacular array of user features. However, surveys indicate that as many as 75 percent of these features regularly go unused. It is important to survey end-users to discover what features they need and want. Four-digit extension dialing, three-way calling, voicemail-email integration, find-me/follow-me call routing, and conference call bridges typically are quite popular. A mobile client for the desk phone is increasingly a must-have feature.

Define Network Requirements

Bandwidth demands, switching and routing capacities, network interfaces,

firewall security, cabling and many other factors can affect the delivery of voice packets across a data network. Organizations must collect an array of metrics to assess the voice readiness of wired and wireless networks, and then determine where additional equipment or upgrades are needed.

Define Support Requirements

Organizations may have network specialists on staff, but IP telephony requires a unique set of skills. In addition to expertise in LAN/WAN implementation, configuration and support, operating the voice network requires understanding of major routing protocols, voice gateways, Quality of Service measures and more.

Identify Partners

Once functional requirements have been identified and documented, it is time to solicit and evaluate vendor proposals to determine which product is the best fit. Once a choice is made, evaluate and chose a solutions provider with demonstrated expertise in the procurement, configuration and implementation of that particular system. A trusted provider will not only streamline the implementation, but can provide critical training and troubleshooting during the cutover phase.

Implementation

Follow the 80/20 rule — 80 percent preparation and 20 percent installation. Working from a current network diagram, document the optimal configuration of all devices to be added — including detailed plans for resolving any potential compatibility issues. Check that the site is fully prepared for new gear, including power and cabling requirements.

Once preparation is complete proceed with hardware installation and software configuration. This is when your team will establish key protocols for prioritizing voice traffic on the network, establishing QoS metrics, setting routing requirements and extending security measures to voice traffic.

Testing and Cutover

To avoid propagating configuration errors throughout the organization, set up a pilot program to stress test the network before going live. Once problems have been identified and corrected, begin with an initial deployment limited to IT staff and key users so they can get accustomed to the new system before moving on to an organization-wide migration.

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