



Getting Technical

Most small business owners have to rely on IT professionals--learn how to get the tech support you need at a rate your business can afford.

From: [Inc.com](#) | **May 2006** | **By:** Eric Butterman

(Copyright Mansueto Ventures LLC. All rights reserved.)

Josef Blumenfeld had a strong global public relations firm going until the crash. It wasn't any stock market meltdown, but rather that of his e-mail and Web site. "I didn't realize how long three days was in the life of my business until every e-mail into me and every possible new piece of business was lost for that period of time," says the 38-year-old owner of Natick, Mass.-based Tradewind Strategies.

Though he was able to get the problem fixed thanks to an IT consultant his wife knew, at \$65 an hour he realized then and there that technology is more than an inconvenience--it's an investment. "When I started putting the budget together to open up shop," he says, "I didn't even include technology in the main considerations. Between \$2,500 in Web site development and \$6,800 in online maintenance a year and the occasional house call, it took more than \$10,000 off my bottom line. That's an important piece of information to have when a small businessperson wants to get started."

So let's say you learn from Blumenfeld's mistake and decide to prepare technologically right from the get-go. How exactly do you pick the best people to help you set up your technology and come in for those occasional checkups? Nelly Yusupova, who heads the New York City chapter of Webgrl's, a women's IT network resource group, says you do it the same way you'd hire any new employee: networking and leads. "I happen to have a background in programming so it's harder for an IT person to get away with something behind my back. But if you can find someone close to you who's had a positive experience with someone in IT, you should really consider hiring that referral," she says. "But becoming a part of a technology resource group is also critical, so you can ask members questions that get immediate answers. That way you're not completely dependent on your IT person's schedule," Yusupova adds. These groups offer technology professionals and small businesses the opportunity to network with others who leverage technology to help propel their businesses forward.

The cost of membership for Yusupova's group is \$55 for an individual and \$150 for a corporate membership for small businesses. The corporate membership offers owners sample Web site contracts and independent freelance agreements, and encourages members to give each other discounts. When picking a resource group, she says it's key to first go to a meeting and make sure it's right for you before signing up.

Yusupova also believes you should start with simple technology goals. "Instead of just wanting the high end of everything, try a basic Web site," she says. "See how it's maintained for a bit and only then start to think about adding complex technology. You may find the Web site to be a handful in itself and at least this way you haven't overextended your business."

Educating yourself on technology is also crucial, offers Autumn Bayles, CIO of Philadelphia-based TastyKake, a baked goods company. "Even if your tech supplier is doing a great job, you should always be looking around and learning about what suppliers are capable of and what the best rates are," she says. "It doesn't necessarily mean you switch to a new hire if you find lower prices, but it gives you negotiating power. You can go back to your supplier and say, 'I found the same deal for half, can we bring the price

INTERNET ARCHIVE
Wayback Machine
2 captures
17 Jul 07 - 7 Sep 08

Go

JUN JUL SEP
17
2006 2007 2008

Close Help

Blumenfeld found one thing many technology experts seem to lack is communication skills. "I'm not a genius at technology by any stretch," he admits. "I've even needed help just to set up my Blackberry. For me, I need someone who will take me through even the easiest technology process step-by-step and won't mind it. I've found that's hard to find. If you can get someone who will give you that extra attention, they're worth paying a little more for."

Actually, Blumenfeld has found some of the best communicators are those who don't even have a college degree--because many of them are still in college. "I work with a company run by students that does work for my Web site and they make sure to keep me in the loop on what they're doing," he says. "Another advantage is they can make immediate changes before the next business day since they're happy to work at night. Those same students who cram for tests all night will also do the same for you. It's frustrating to call a technology company up and have them tell you they're closed for the day." Blumenfeld has also saved substantially with college students because they're just thrilled to have any extra income at all: "Many of them are working at around \$30 an hour and it feels good to work with people who I know need the money and will work hard for it."

Gordon Bridge, who worked at IBM for years as vice president of sales, has also found one-stop shops can save time and, therefore, money. That's why he's now president and CEO of one. Companies like his Austin, Texas-based CM IT Solutions do everything from designing a Web site to hosting one, and even provide software and hardware. "It depends on your needs," he says, "but if you don't want to make four different calls, it's good to know the same company that will create your Web site can also bring you a new Dell computer if you need it."

Know What Your Tech Person Does... And Why

Regardless of whom you bring in, don't allow them to leave you in a lurch, reminds Yusupova. "It's very easy for an IT person to make you dependent on them," she says. "They can try little things like create passwords for vital programs that only they know, or make your initial technology setup so complicated that you'll have no choice but to regularly have them in at their hourly rate."

Bayles agrees with this advice, but warns not to be too quick to get rid of a tech person if you're not on the same page right away. "I can think of several long-term IT workers who I didn't see eye to eye with immediately that turned out to be wonderful," she says. "IT specialists tend to assume you don't know what they do, so they don't always ask what they may be doing wrong. Rather than let a problem build, I've found that by sitting them down and going through my concerns, many of them become much easier to deal with." But despite recommending being more open, Bayles stresses that you need to close a bad tech relationship sooner rather than later. "An early out clause in an IT worker contract is important because of how much you're paying them. Just like you'd want to rid yourself of a virus early, the same can be said for a worker not fitting in."