Productivity: running a business instead of running around

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One of the things that makes most business owners proud is the chance to be their own boss. When you want a day off, you can just take it, right? The answer, alas, is usually a resounding 'No'. We work all hours, answer emails at midnight and spend time juggling priorities and problems. If only we could magic some time out of nowhere. With the right approach and the right tools, we can: and both are surprisingly easy to obtain.

Clare Evans, author of 'Time Management for Dummies', says "Most business owners try to do everything themselves. Either everything becomes an emergency, or you take care of things as they come in, rather than stopping to ask 'What do I need to focus on?'" Efficiency and time management expert, Cory Cook, agrees: "When you just take the day as it comes instead of planning ahead, you're always putting out fires instead of strategically moving forward."

Evans says the first step to organisational nirvana is the business plan. "Many businesses I speak to either have no plan; or they made one which now just gathers dust on a shelf. Your plan need only be one page long, but it has to be a living, breathing document which informs your priorities." Cook adds, "The plan is a reminder of your 'big picture' goals – it stops you getting bogged down in the small stuff and

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allows you to see the real priorities and the value of what you do with your time."

Next comes prioritisation – with the support of your plan. Says Evans, "Every day, work out what you're going to do and when you're going to do it. Sure, that sounds obvious... but few of us do it. Split your 'to-do' list into items which are urgent, important or nice-to-have". Cook notes, "Even your best planned day can go awry, so cover the urgent issues first to get ahead of the game."

Cook also says that business owners must lose the 'do everything' mentality, fast. "There's a great aphorism, 'If you want something done right, be an excellent delegator'. Managers think they need to be good at everything in the business; and that's simply not true. Recognise the parts you're good at, and bring other people or tools in to pick up the slack – the accountant, the marketing help etc. As soon as it's practical- and that will be sooner than you might think - outsource your lower priorities or weaker skills to other companies, employees or technologies."

What about those technologies? Evans says, "Tools for safe storage in the Cloud are a huge benefit, enabling you to access and share documents from the office, home or out on the road without being a tech wizard, are a huge benefit." Cook adds, "The Cloud also makes it easier to bring in team members in a

flash: everyone can be on the same page without a flood of emails. The Cloud makes sharing in real-time an option for everyone."

But these tools are means to an end, so they have to work. Says Evans, "You want technology which is reliable, takes little effort to set up, and syncs seamlessly. It's also both a benefit and a drawback that we have so much information at our fingertips, and we can be contacted 24/7. There has to be a cut-off point, boundaries beyond which you can ignore calls or close the door and have a personal life." Mobile phones which show names instead of numbers, or Instant Messenger and Unified Communications systems in which we can set our status to 'Busy' or 'Away', both go a long way to stemming the tide.

HOW MICROSOFT CAN HELP

Microsoft Office 365 brings together online versions of the best communications and collaboration tools from Microsoft. Subscribe to web-enabled tools that let you access your email, documents, contacts, and calendars from virtually anywhere, on almost on any device. Microsoft Office 365 is available from £3.90 per user per month for up to 50 users and from £5.20 per user per month for 50+ users.

Case study: Charbrew

Charbrew is an award-winning specialist tea trading company. Despite being only a three-man operation, its products can be found in retailers like Sainsbury's and Ocado, and has warehousing facilities in both the UK and Sri Lanka, serving a global client base.

Founder and CEO, Adam Soliman says, "I couldn't have moved this fast without the right technology. Technology, for me, is about being able to have that presence in the office without actually having to be there. With Office365 I can store and transfer files to any device, wherever I am. A major European retailer recently wanted some stock urgently. Could she have a clear idea of our stock, to place an order within 24 hours? I was on the road, but by that evening I had accessed the stock control files, worked out a price, and sold the order. That sort of guaranteed backup from technology is invaluable to a small business."

Office 365 also keeps Charbrew lean and competitive. "We used to pay around £200 per month for a server and IT support", says Soliman. "Using Office 365, we simply cut that expense completely. Office 365 scales up and down according to our demand. It means our technology can move as fast as our business."

Five ways Microsoft Office 365 will make your workday more productive

If you're burning the candle at both ends and juggling endless priorities, Office 365 can probably help. And from as little as £3.90 per month – less than a fifth of other services like business phone contracts – it's won't burn a hole in your pocket. Oh, and there's a free trial, too. Here are our top five ways Office 365 can buy you some time.

1. Work Anywhere

The principle of Office 365 is to give you access to any information (emails, documents, calendars, files) on any device (PC, laptop, tablet, phone), anywhere with an internet connection. You can even work on other people's machines, because all your services are available through nothing more than a web browser - ideal for freelancers! Change emails, contacts or calendar entries on one device and they will automatically be updated on all your other devices, so you can move seamlessly from one location to the next.

2. Get a website up in minutes

Just starting out in business? You'll want a website, then. With SharePoint Online in Office 365, you can create simple template-driven websites from scratch in a matter of minutes. You can have your own domain name (www.mycompany.com) too. Customise it with the Site Designer for something more glamorous, or get a basic site online and congratulate yourself on another marketing job done and dusted.

3. Get the gift of Presence

With Presence, you can see in real-time who amongst your contacts (both in your organisation and beyond) is available to talk. In Outlook, coloured markers denote "Available", "Away", "Busy" and other statuses. You'll know straight away whether to phone, send an Instant Message or email – all of which you can do with one click. Plus, you can of course set your own status to open the door when you're free or keep people out when you're concentrating.

4. Share with anyone you want to, safely and securely

With Team Sites, you can create document repositories for teams, departments, projects or any other group of people; including external stakeholders. Team Sites are secure yet easy to create and use; and include many of the usual functions of Office 365 (like Calendars and collaborative document editing), which means you can effectively extend your Office tools to third parties working with you on specific projects. This makes collaboration simple and natural, plus, of course, it presents a very professional image.

5. Let's have the meeting right now

Office 365 includes Lync Online, a unified communications toolkit in the truest sense of the word: you can pick and swap between whichever tool meets your immediate needs. Nudge a contact with an Instant Message (because with Presence you can see that they're free); then escalate into an audio or video call. Perhaps you want to share a document too? No problem- screen sharing is included, too. You can even conduct more formal online presentations, in which attendees can sign up using a web-form, and then join in a virtual auditorium run directly from your desktop.

Outfox the competition with productivity tools

Ulrika Hedlund, CEO, Business Productivity, (www.businessproductivity.com)

It has often been fashionable for productivity and time management specialists to measure the effect of new technologies in terms of time saved. There's nothing wrong with that, especially when you look at, say, a piece of software: a new function can shave minutes off repetitive tasks for each employee, and when that is applied to a large enterprise, it can add up to thousands of hours saved each year.

However, for small businesses, the real value of products like Office 365 is in generating a step-change in competitiveness. For a consumer-grade price (a few pounds per month), small businesses now have access to the same type of IT infrastructure as large corporations– the sort of enterprise-grade productivity tools which were simply not available to them before. I can vouch for this myself. In my days in large companies, I had access to the best tools in the world on my desktop; now that I run my own business, I still have those same tools at my fingertips.

The difference is, as a small business it is imperative to leverage these technologies in order to remain competitive. With a globalised talent base, any company can find expertise and resources anywhere in the world; but to bring people together, protect the company's intellectual property, and deliver a service repeatably and profitably, you need technology to help you.

Those tools also come with no need to invest in technology, which again levels the playing field with larger competitors. Office 365 comes off the shelf: you don't need new servers or to hire people with technical competencies. Cloud services are simply pay-as-you-go; when you take on a new member of staff, it takes just a few moments to set them up on a dashboard, and they are good to go. Scaling back is just as easy.

When you think in terms of competitiveness, it also becomes easy to work out which aspects of a powerful piece of software like Office 365 to implement first. I always advise small businesses to get the basics in place, before unlocking the greater value-add elements in the platform. For example, in most small companies, each member of staff has their own contacts list. If their computer crashes, it can be disastrous; and if they go on holiday, nobody else in the office can really progress their business. Something as easy as having all customer contact details available to everyone, on any device, stored centrally and safely in the Cloud, is massively empowering, easy to achieve, and – above all – the sort of thing that big corporate competitors simply take for granted.

In any business, the greatest investment is your people. You owe it to them to make sure they have the best possible tools. With the help of technology, I can save time; but I can also produce higher quality work, and that's what will differentiate my business. Sure, we can tot up time saved; but delivering a better product with the time bought back: that's true competitiveness.