

Small businesses build for success with collaboration and communication



Facing an unsettled economy, Canadian small businesses need tools and technologies to operate efficiently and grow their markets. New collaboration and communication systems help companies expand their reach and positively impact their communities.

When the financial analysts at TD Economics unveiled their outlook and recommendations for small and mid-sized businesses (SMBs) in 2007, we heard a good-news/bad-news story. On one hand, they said Canada's booming loonie spells a healthy domestic market in which many SMBs will thrive. They also said SMBs focused on international export would do well, and the overall investment picture for small business was good. However, the labour shortage, high energy costs and the discouraging business climate in the United States will make life difficult for some small businesses, especially those that derive most of their revenue from south of the border. Much of this has proven to be true.

This is troubling considering our country's economic fabric. According to Industry Canada, nearly 98 per cent of the nation's companies are in the small business segment with fewer than 100 employees. Now more than ever, small businesses need tools to optimize their operations.

To perform in this unsettled market, the TD Economics analysts recommended small businesses focus on cost reductions and productivity improvements. For many organizations, good communicative links with key business stakeholders could spell the difference between success and failure. New collaborative trends and tools provide opportunities for small businesses to improve productivity, extend their markets and grow their companies.

Small businesses build for success with collaboration and communication

Communication 2.0

Numerous new communication technologies facilitate small business connectivity with customers, partners and employees. Social networking, collaboration software, blogs and wikis have all become viable connective options for companies looking to extend their spheres of influence. One of the richest interactive experiences also comes from video conferencing, an increasingly useful tool helping companies strengthen their ties with clients, suppliers and workers through effective, affordable virtual technology.

For those of us who experienced video conferencing in the age of dial-up Internet connections, the technology might bring to mind jittery pictures and broken voice streams. Video conferencing also used to be expensive and skewed towards large organizations that could afford it. Thankfully, advancements have made the technology more useful, and more accessible. Behind-the-scenes software along with the build-out of high-speed Internet networks have transformed those broken video conferencing sessions into interactions with much better sound and visuals, and the service has become much more affordable. Given its cost-effectiveness, small businesses are using video and Web conferencing solutions on their office computers and laptops to make sales presentations, demonstrate products, collaborate on issues, and train employees – without having to travel or juggle schedules.

At the same time, there's a movement towards video conferencing services in meeting areas and business centres where small businesses also conduct business. The technology helps them work together, even though the business realm itself is becoming more distributed. Today, employees can work from anywhere – home offices, customer premises, hotel rooms, business centres – while suppliers are more likely to be situated overseas rather than next door. Similarly, customers could be located in different parts of the country or half-way around the world. Employing video conferencing and other collaboration tools, companies can hold company-wide meetings – an increasingly useful practice for distributed organizations that seek to preserve face-to-face meetings without having to leave the office.

SMBs are integral to the Canadian economy. Now more than ever, many of them need tools to optimize their operations.

Small businesses build for success with collaboration and communication

The fact that some video conferencing service providers offer per-hour connections gives businesses the chance to try the technology and see how it benefits them before implementing it permanently. These external service providers also give business operators the opportunity to use video and Web conferencing in more places, which makes the service more beneficial. After all, many small business owners and workers spend as much time outside of the office as in it – and for some, the ability to meet other people in their industries is crucial, making business centres and chambers of commerce with intelligent meeting rooms and conference areas important aspects of their businesses. Installing collaborative tools such as conferencing solutions into these business-community-building locations allows small businesses to benefit from the technology wherever they happen to be.

Audio conferencing is another inexpensive yet increasingly useful communication tool for small businesses looking for ways to connect with off-site contacts on an ad-hoc basis. On-demand conferencing services quickly transform regular phone calls into meetings with numerous participants, while avoiding the monthly fees of more permanent audio conferencing services. The flexibility of on-demand services is becoming a necessary aspect of business for small companies, which need their communication and collaboration services to be as agile as they are.

From the research TELUS has conducted with analyst firm IDC Canada, we've learned that small businesses are moving towards these novel connective solutions. The research shows that nearly a third of small-business information and communications technology projects include conferencing solutions.

Collaboration and community

We certainly are witnessing a movement towards rich collaboration. It's happening among small businesses in all sectors as companies install cost-effective communication solutions. For instance, a Montreal-based printing company implemented an email and document-sharing system through a Web-based portal that allowed customers and employees to exchange information and collaborate on designs quickly – an important facet of the organization's success is its speed-of-service for the fast-paced ad agencies and direct marketing companies that the company counts as customers.

Many small business owners and workers spend as much time outside of the office as in it – and for some, the ability to meet other people in their industries is crucial.

Small businesses build for success with collaboration and communication

The combined communication and collaboration platform is “hosted” – the hardware and software behind the scenes reside at a service provider’s data centre, so the printing firm doesn’t need in-house technology experts to manage the system. The system has allowed the print house’s employees to access and respond to email messages from any Web connection, and it also lets them work with clients on designs from almost anywhere. As a result, the company’s employees are more productive whether they’re at the office, working from home or working from another location such as a customer’s office – and they’re helping to further foster the customer relationships that have made the firm successful.

Such ties are becoming important success factors for small businesses. According to an Industry Canada study of small-business practices, 31 per cent of small companies engage in collaboration to acquire complementary knowledge and technologies. By expanding the number of people they communicate with, small businesses expand their knowledge bases and their spheres of influence – they find new customers, new business ideas, and new ways of working efficiently through these information exchanges. As small businesses become more collaborative, they increase the size and usefulness of their own communities – the number of partners, clients and peers that, together, form the environments in which companies operate.

This brings us back to the fact that communication and collaboration help small businesses be as productive and efficient as possible, which can make a difference during unsettled economic times – and with each tool or technology available to help them succeed, we witness ancillary positive effects on the nation overall, because SMBs represent a significant portion of the Canadian economy. When the opportunity arises, small businesses should try novel connectivity solutions such as video conferencing, on-demand conferencing, and wireless advancements to see how they benefit their operations.

According to an Industry Canada study of SMB practices, 31 per cent of small companies engage in collaboration to acquire complementary knowledge and technologies.

Appeared in the Toronto Board of Trade ‘On Board’ magazine, Fall 2008.



C2167

telustalksbusiness.com

AT TELUS, SMALL BUSINESS MATTERS.

We are committed to helping you achieve business success.

For more information visit telustalksbusiness.com