

Internet and e-mail

dti

The DTI drives our ambition of 'prosperity for all' by working to create the best environment for business success in the UK. We help people and companies become more productive by promoting enterprise, innovation and creativity.

We champion UK business at home and abroad. We invest heavily in world-class science and technology. We protect the rights of working people and consumers. And we stand up for fair and open markets in the UK, Europe and the world.

Achieving best practice in your business is a key theme within DTI's approach to business support solutions, providing ideas and insights into how you can improve performance across your business. By showing what works in other businesses, we can help you see what can help you, and then support you in implementation. This brochure focuses on these solutions.

In only a few years, e-mail and internet access have become an integral part of the way British businesses operate.

Even the smallest companies are using them to improve communication, access information and cut costs. The most successful businesses, however, are going further and using these technologies as the basis of initiatives to improve efficiency, reduce costs, find new business opportunities and work more closely with customers and suppliers.

This guide looks at best practice in e-mail and internet use and explains how you could get more out of your existing set up.

This brochure is for: Businesses who want to develop their use of e-mail and internet access.

It covers: Low-cost, practical steps and best practice examples of getting more from these technologies.

Contents

- 01 E-mail and the internet
- 02 Getting the most out of the internet
- 04 Broadband
- 06 Buying and selling online
- 09 Sharing information
- 12 Getting the most out of e-mail
- 15 Working smarter
- 17 Doing it right
- 18 Further help and advice

E-mail and the internet

According to the DTI International Benchmarking Study 2003, over 90% of UK businesses have access to the internet and e-mail.

The speed of adoption of these technologies has been impressive, with many of Britain's most successful businesses now regarding them as being as central to their infrastructures as their phone lines or electricity supplies.

There is no doubt, though, that some companies have only just begun to tap the full potential of these technologies. This brochure is designed to illustrate some of the possibilities available – by looking at best practice in internet and e-mail use – and to alert you to the potential pitfalls. It covers:

GETTING THE MOST OF THE INTERNET

- **Dial-up deals** – how you could save money on your internet connection by shopping around.
- **Broadband** – how your business could benefit and how to upgrade from your dial-up connection.
- **Buying and selling online** – how you could use the internet to cut costs, open new markets and improve stock management.
- **Sharing information** – how you could improve sales, forecasting and efficiency by opening up your systems to customers and suppliers.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF E-MAIL

- **Customer service and marketing** – how you can keep your customers informed and market more effectively.
- **Working smarter** – how virtual teamworking can help you work more effectively.
- **Doing it right** – how to guard against spam, viruses, inappropriate use and e-mail overload.

Getting the most out of the internet

DIAL-UP DEALS

Some businesses manage with a basic dial-up package to connect to the internet, paying for each call at local rate. While this can work for businesses that use the web only for occasional browsing, you may find that if you use more than a few hours a month, you could be better off with a different payment option.

Package deals

Many Internet Service Providers offer packages where you get free unmetered internet access for a fixed fee every month. Expect to pay around £8-£11 per month. This is suitable if you anticipate using the internet for longer periods. A lot of these packages still require a BT line and some are in conjunction with BT SurfTime, though the amount of choice is improving.

PROS

- Cheaper than pay-as-you-go for heavier users of the internet.
- You can choose a package tailored to your requirements (all-day or off-peak only).
- You can leave it on, so you don't have to keep connecting.

CONS

- Download times for larger files and e-mails are still slow (this still uses the standard 56K modem).
- Some ISPs have more users than they can cope with, leading to difficulties in signing on at peak times, and connections may be cut if there is a period of inactivity.
- You must consider security, such as a firewall, if you leave the connection open all the time.
- Some packages are not designed to meet normal business needs, for example they may prevent you from sending bulk e-mails.



Subscription

There is a range of subscription packages where you pay a monthly fee and call costs. They cost about £100 a year. The benefit is that you often get a quicker more reliable service with good technical support and other services.

PROS

- Quicker, more reliable service.
 - Good technical support.
 - Additional services – like security options.
-

CONS

- More expensive.
- May not be worth paying the additional costs if your business is not using the internet for business-critical communication or information sharing.

Other considerations

The ISP market is very competitive, which means you may be offered a wide range of other services. These include: a set amount of free internet access each month; improved after-sales and technical support; better security; and free content or web hosting. Remember to shop around to get the best deal for your business.

Internet magazines, available from most newsagents, will give comprehensive listings of ISPs and their prices and services.



Broadband



Businesses that send large amounts of information – like CAD/CAM files, video clips or presentations – may well find that they need a faster internet connection than a 56Kbps modem.

WHAT IS BROADBAND?

Simply put, broadband is a fast, 'always-on' connection to the internet.

FAST

Wider availability and improved competition mean that most businesses can now get a broadband package that provides internet access at ten times the speed of a dial-up connection for as little as £20 a month.

ALWAYS-ON

When people think of broadband they tend to think first of speed. However, it's the fact the broadband gives you a permanent connection to the internet that really opens up new possibilities.

The internet is far more than a way of accessing websites – it's a global infrastructure that allows computers anywhere to exchange information. This means that, even if you are not interested in building a website, your business could benefit from more efficient processes, better communication and outsourced services.

Essentially, broadband internet access is the foundation of all e-business. Without it, businesses cannot get the full benefit of new technology.

GETTING BROADBAND

To get broadband, you need to:

- Check you are in a broadband area – most UK businesses now are. Visit the broadband checker in the Technology section of our site to find out.
- Decide which type of broadband you want – it is available by telephone line, cable, satellite and wireless network, among others. The different types have different speeds and costs. Where you live will determine which options are available to you.
- Choose a service provider, known as an ISP – this is the company that you pay to connect you to the internet. Costs can start from £20 a month.
- Get some computer hardware – the ISP will usually supply the broadband modem (or antenna or dish) plus cables, and will charge a fee for installing and setting up the connection. Several ISPs also offer a less expensive DIY option. You may also need to buy network cards for your PCs.

For more about getting broadband, read our *Broadband* brochure. For more about the options broadband offer your business, read the sections in this brochure on *Buying and selling online* and *Finding and sharing information*.

Best practice in: Technology

Sector: Retail

Size of firm: 2 employees

(plus part-time employees as required)

Location: Southend-on-Sea

Website: www.aquapress.co.uk



AquaPress

A fast always-on connection has enabled AquaPress, a specialist diving book retailer, to enrich the services it offers to customers and to transform its own internal business operations

Established in 1996, AquaPress initially sold its products mainly by telephone and mail order. Then, in 2000, the company moved from a 56K modem to broadband, which allowed it to upgrade its static website to a database driven site. This enabled the company to provide their customers with a number of enhanced features to improve the buying experience.

The website offers features such as enhanced image options and sample chapters in pdf format that can be accessed by customers if they wish and if they have the bandwidth to do so. This service has had a direct impact on sales of specific books. In one case this resulted in up to an estimated six times the volume that they would normally expect to sell.

Orders from overseas have also increased significantly with an increase of about 15% in exports in the consumer market. Chris attributes this directly to the enhanced website made possible by the implementation of broadband.

The change also helped streamline the company's internal business operations - which was essential once the website began to generate a significant number of orders.

As the company's partners, Chris and Angela Davey, say: "Now the office is quieter! The phones do not ring as much, but orders are up." The electronic receipt of orders has meant that Chris and Angela are able to handle significantly more orders than before and to schedule their work better. "Without broadband we would have to have a telephone exchange to handle the volume that we are now processing through a single line."

Most tellingly, the cost of implementing broadband has been considerably less than operating a 56K modem technology. The broadband connection costs AquaPress £30 a month. "You can't make many calls on dial-up before you get to £30," says Chris.

Buying and selling online

When the internet first came to widespread public attention, it was consumer retail websites that hogged the headlines. While some were successful – and others failed spectacularly – the effect was to distract attention from the real business opportunities of the new technology.

A few years down the line, the picture is much clearer: though the internet did change the way people shopped, most of all it changed the way businesses work.

This section looks at online auctions and trading hubs – two simple uses of the internet that businesses have used to produce real, measurable results.

ONLINE AUCTIONS

As the name suggests, these are computerised versions of traditional auctions where prices are set by buyers bidding against each other. What makes online auctions so powerful is that, with internet technology, vast numbers of businesses or individuals can bid – allowing sellers to get the best price. Conversely, the speed, simplicity and variety of auctions mean that shrewd buyers can cut the time and cost of procurement.

Online auctions are already having a huge impact on companies' balance sheets. For example, a recent survey suggested that, by 2005, European online auction would be trading goods to the value of £58 billion.

There are two main types of auction:

- Forward auctions – where lots are sold to the highest bidder.
- Reverse auctions – where suppliers compete on price and the lowest bid for a tender wins the business.

FORWARD AUCTIONS

Forward auctions can help suppliers to:

- acquire new customers and extend their geographic reach
- test new products and establish price points
- dispose of excess inventory quickly
- price according to demand and stock levels
- reduce sales costs by minimising marketing spend.

They can benefit buyers by helping them to:

- source non-critical supplies, like stationery and office furniture
- acquire specialist, second-hand equipment inexpensively
- reduce the time spent on procurement by setting up automated searches and bid alerts.

REVERSE AUCTIONS

Reverse auctions can help buyers to:

- manage complex procurement contracts
- attract a larger pool of supplier
- reduce time and administrative costs
- drive down costs – some large companies have reported cost reductions of 10% or more.

And, because online auctions are increasingly sophisticated, they can weigh price against factors like service, quality and reliability to find the most attractive bid.

Reverse auctions can benefit buyers by helping them to:

- gain access to customers who are ready to buy quickly – without having to launch a sales campaign
- compete for business globally
- offload stock or build market share.

Of course, even unsuccessful bidders gain valuable market information.

AUCTION BEST PRACTICE

If you are considering entering an online auction, make sure you check issues like:

- accreditation – some auctions have qualifying criteria
- fee structures – there may be a registration fee
- how payment is managed – sometimes this is between the parties, sometimes through the auction site itself. Check also who pays for shipping, insurance and other costs.
- supplier reputation – monitor feedback from previous bidders. Although it is estimated that only 0.04% of listings are fraudulent, buyers should carry out sensible checks or use sites with closed billing which protects transactions.
- bidding system – how does the bidding work? Can you withdraw bids during the auction period?

For the actual event, assemble a bid team and decide your opening and worst-case prices in advance. Then:

- Devise a spreadsheet for complex contract so you can adjust your bid and assess the competition.
- Don't bid too early. Set yourself a maximum bid and stick to it. Set up a system of e-mail alerts so you know when bid status changes. Consider using auction-tracking software to monitor multiple auction sites.
- Analyse the results afterwards. It will help you improve your strategy.



TRADING HUBS

Trading hubs (also known as e-marketplaces and online exchanges) are websites where buyers and sellers trade goods and services online. At least 6% of business-to-business trade in the EU is expected to be done through trading hubs by 2005.

Trading hubs vary according to the size and number of companies using them and the type of commodity traded. There are already successful hubs in markets as diverse as energy, textiles and logistics.

Like online auctions, trading hubs allow participants to trade straightforwardly with a wide variety of buyers and sellers. Two of the biggest factors driving the growth of trading hubs are that large businesses can use them to reduce stock holdings while small business can bid collectively to earn volume discounts or to jointly deliver a large contract.

The hubs earn their money from a combination of transaction fees, subscriptions and advertising, paid by customers each time they make a trade.

TRADING HUB BEST PRACTICE

If you are considering entering a trading hub, make sure you check issues like:

- **choice** – are all your major suppliers involved? Does the hub have a comprehensive list of products and services so you can compare like with like?
- **business relationships** – could using a trading hub undermine your status as a favoured customer? Would it be costly to end your relationship with an existing supplier?
- **administration** – do you have adequate systems in place for order fulfilment? Will you be able to distribute to all territories? Are your internal business processes suitable for active online trading?
- **disclosure** – are you comfortable with publicising information on prices and stock levels where your competitors can also view it? Will buyers gain the advantage as they get more information?
- **fees** – how do these compare to any savings in sales and marketing costs?



Sharing information

Alongside online shopping, the other compelling feature of the dotcom era was the promise of access to a limitless pool of largely free information.

Unlike some of the wilder claims made for the internet, this was a promise that has been delivered. It has never been simpler or quicker to conduct research, assess the state of markets or monitor competitor prices.

However, the rise of search engines like Google, Yahoo! and AskJeeves highlights the fact that not all information is of equal value. The leading businesses have seen that the real value of the internet is not in the millions of pages of free information, but rather in its ability to function as the foundation of secure company, client and supplier networks. This allows systems to talk to each other, improving efficiency and productivity, and reducing costs.

EXTRANETS

At a simple level this improved flow of information could mean building an extranet so that customers or suppliers can access information like stock levels, delivery times or progress reports. This could be something as basic as a password protected area of your website, or as sophisticated as a system that allows you to share product and pricing data, accept orders and payments, and managing collaborative projects online.

Adding a password-protected area to your website is relatively straightforward and inexpensive – it can cost from about £25 per month for the additional web hosting fee. To give your extranet added levels of functionality – like increased security and publishing facilities –there are a number of software solutions starting at around £200.

VIRTUAL PRIVATE NETWORKS

Similar in principle to an extranet is a Virtual Private Network (VPN). Effectively a VPN uses the internet to extend your company network globally. In other words, with the correct security clearance, you can use a VPN to access your company network from any internet connected computer. This opens a huge range of possibilities:

- Sales people can access real time data on stocks and prices.
- Home workers can receive e-mail and work on the most up to date documents.



- People working away from the office, like engineers or delivery people, can provide real time information – like progress reports on work or immediate confirmation of delivery.
- Companies with several offices can network sites more cheaply than by leasing dedicated connections.

Some VPN retailers claim running costs savings of between 60% and 80% over remote access by modems and up to 40% on office-to-office communication. Most VPN options require a broadband connection and have installation and annual charges. You can expect to upwards of £1,500 to set up a VPN, but costs will vary depending on your requirements.

OUTSOURCED SERVICES

With a broadband internet connection and a reasonable degree of system integration, your business could take advantage of electronic outsourcing. Rather than doing things in-house, you can lease access to the labour, expertise and technology of other businesses, letting you concentrate on what you do best and most profitably – your core business.

Businesses of all sizes are using electronic outsourcing to solve skills shortages, cut costs and risk, and reduce time to market.

Below are examples of some of the outsourced services you could purchase:

- Rented applications like e-mail, storage or e-commerce facilities.
- Discrete functions like website maintenance, IT support, accountancy or payroll processing.
- Logistics management, data mining services or other functions requiring significant investment in skills or hardware.

The benefits of outsourcing include:

- Reduced costs – you can cut capital expenditure on IT hardware, software and training. Many providers will bill on a pay-as-you-use basis.
- Simple implementation and ease of use – most outsourced applications integrate seamlessly with your existing systems and run on familiar interfaces, such as web browsers, or through common software packages.
- Low maintenance – many services include support, development and upgrades in the price.
- Grows as you grow – often you can rent more user licences as and when you need them.

To read more about extranets, VPNs or outsourced services, visit www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice.



Best practice in: Broadband
Sector: Catering
Size of firm: 24 employees
Location: London
Website: www.darlingtonscoffee.co.uk



Darlingtons Limited

Darlingtons' virtual private network (VPN) helps the coffee distribution company integrate its customer data and back-office system.

The company, which supplies coffee, tea and a range of accessories to restaurants and cafés was founded in 1995. It has expanded rapidly since then, and plans to have a complete national network within five years, based on a centralised back-office systems and customer database running over a VPN.

Graham Ralph, Finance Director explains: "The decision was driven by the need to streamline our accounting operations and information exchange between the offices as a result of our expansion. The benefits of this centralisation include improved financial monitoring, better services for customers and greater flexibility for interchanging staff."

Now, customer information is held centrally and accessed from the branch offices via the secure broadband connections. Orders from the branches are made directly to the central system and invoices are generated centrally for automatic printing locally. The benefits from this include faster response times to customers and increased efficiency in internal operations as all the information required is immediately accessible from one place.

Graham estimates that: "with over 2,500 invoices generated each month we should be able to reduce our accounting and auditing costs by almost £30,000 per annum, which is a considerable saving for us."

The other major benefit has been the improved flexibility offered by the system, which allows more effective allocation of work across the organisation. Now, when people are away on holiday or one office has spare capacity, it is easier to share work. In turn, this has reduced the importance of the London office – with more functions taking place in areas where office costs are lower.

Says Graham: "It has changed the way we view the Hampshire office. We have space and budget restrictions in the London office. We are now able to base staff in Hampshire where previously they would have had to be based in London to have full access to our systems."

Getting the most out of e-mail

Customer service and marketing –

E-mail is an incredibly powerful, low-cost communications tool that businesses are using to work more efficiently, provide better customer service and market their goods. This section looks at best practice in using it to keep your customers informed and to market more effectively.

E-MAIL MARKETING

E-mail can provide an extremely cost-effective way of marketing to your customers. Whether this is with regular newsletter updates or special offers, it gives you the ability to target customers cheaply and instantly, without the time lag and costs associated with printing. And, unlike other forms of marketing, e-mail is excellent for generating word of mouth interest and referrals. Few people would bother passing on a leaflet or piece of direct mail, but it's very common for people to forward interesting e-mail offers to friends and family.

It's essential not to overuse e-mail marketing, though. What makes it so effective – the personal, time-sensitive interaction – is also what makes people react to irrelevant or unwanted e-mail. Remember too that the set-up and performance of people's computers varies tremendously. Some office computers don't have soundcards, which means music or video files may not work. Firewalls, which protect networks, are also common these days. Often they will limit the size or type of file that customers can receive. If you think this may apply to your e-mail campaign, one solution can be to host files on your website and simply send an e-mail with a link.

There is also an issue of compatibility. Different programmes will display e-mail differently. An e-mail with images or an HTML component could look messy on a different set-up, or even cause the programme to crash.

The solution is to profile your customers and understand what the best format is for them. Some may like e-marketing with whistles and bells, others might just like a plain-text e-mail.

E-MAIL MARKETING RULES

In December 2003, new rules came into force covering marketing e-mails to individuals. The Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations introduced an opt-in consent procedure for commercial e-mails – which means you can only target people who have agreed to be contacted. This

is a change from the previous rules, which only required that customers be given the opportunity to opt out of being marketed to.

To save having to contact all your existing customers to get consent, the rules apply only to new customers. You can continue marketing to your current customers provided they can opt-out of future messages and the messages cover similar products and services. The other main point is that you must clearly mark your e-mails with your contact details and include a valid return e-mail address.

For more information on the new rules, visit the DTI's website, www.dti.gov.uk/industries/ecomunications, and read the section 'Directive on Privacy and Electronic Communications'.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

As well as being a powerful way of promoting your business and winning new customers, e-mail can be useful tool for improving customer service and hence customer satisfaction and retention.

Encouraging customers to contact you by e-mail can benefit both parties – they do not have to hang on the phone or make contact in working hours, and you do not have to respond immediately – which can free up staff from answering the phone.

The ideal scenario for a customer is that when they e-mail a query to a business, they receive a prompt answer from the person who is handling it. Obviously this is not always practical for most businesses, so one option is to set up an automatic e-mail acknowledgement. This immediately responds to e-mailed queries, so that the customer knows their query has been received and gets an idea of when they can expect a response.

While e-mail can be an excellent way of reducing the costs of customer support, its instant nature has made customers more demanding. They do not expect to wait a week to receive replies. It's essential to set a reasonable reply period and stick to it or you may find customers abandoning e-mail and going back to the telephone.

It's also important to try and get e-mail customer service right first time – the speed and convenience quickly evaporates if the customer gets sent back requests for further information. As with the time issues, the best businesses manage their customers – they put guidance on their website explaining the information they need to process requests. Many businesses also include escalation procedures so that customers can take a problem further without resorting to the telephone or a letter. One major UK company, for example, includes a note on e-mails saying that, if the customer feels that their complaint is being dealt with unsatisfactorily, they should reply with the word 'Get it right!' in the subject line. These e-mails are then automatically sent to senior staff with the power to resolve problems, issue refunds etc where they receive priority treatment.

Finally, though e-mail is less formal than letters, it should still be professional. Even a brief acknowledgement e-mail needs to be professional, grammatically-correct and spell-checked before it is sent out.

Best practice in: Technology
Sector: Model racing-car manufacturer
Size of firm: 22 employees
Location: Northampton
Website: www.racing-cars.com



Schumacher Racing

Careful use of e-mail and web technology has allowed Schumacher to turn its customer base into an online community, building loyalty and generating sales.

The company is one of the most famous and best-established names in the world of radio-controlled model cars. As the designer and producer of championship winning cars for several decades, it has always had a loyal customer base.

With the development of technology, Schumacher saw opportunities to strengthen these relationships still further. Central to its strategy was the use of the internet and e-mail to position the company not just as a supplier of cars, but as a member of the model car community of enthusiasts.

The Schumacher website has full e-commerce facilities and a strong community feel to encourage repeat visits. The front page is regularly updated with the latest news from the model car industry and the site hosts popular message boards and discussion groups. A forum on the site enables customers to submit technical queries, and it is testament to the community nature of the site that visitors as well as staff regularly respond to the queries.

Digital images, created in CAD at the product development stage, are also used to market the products before they are even rolling off the production line.

The company's large database of e-mail addresses gives scope for highly targeted, personalised e-marketing. On a monthly basis, customers receive an e-mailed company newsletter containing all the latest product information, advice, hints and tips on getting the best performance from their car.

Behind the scenes, Schumacher uses integrated business software to manage sales and stock inventory, something that is crucial given the hundreds of components needed for each car and the thriving spare parts trade. The company is also broadband-enabled – using a fast, secure ADSL connection to communicate with international suppliers and upload new information onto the website.

Robin Schumacher, Managing Director, sees technology as a key factor in the company's success. It has streamlined the way Schumacher works internally and transformed the way the company deals with customers and suppliers.

Working smarter

VIRTUAL TEAMWORKING

Virtual teamworking is using technology to allow a group of people to work together regardless of where they are based. While this is especially useful for companies with several offices, its uses are not restricted to internal projects – increasingly businesses are using it to get suppliers, customers and staff all working together.

Working virtually can make your business more flexible, more responsive and reduce time to market. Some of the main benefits are:

- reduced costs – on premises, travel and courier costs.
- improved productivity – less downtime and smoother workflow.
- eliminates distance as a consideration – people can collaborate globally, meaning you can always get the right people for the job as well as extending your market reach.
- closer business relationships – involve customers and other stakeholders in key decisions and keep them better informed.


The first step in virtual teamworking is e-mail. Because most people check their mail every day and because it provides a searchable audit trail, it is an excellent way of managing projects, exchanging information and getting client input and approval.

Other benefits include:

- distribution lists – these can be set up to make sure relevant parties are automatically informed as projects develop.
- calendar co-ordination – products like Novell NetMail XE and Novell NetMail (for more than 100 users) are purpose-built to plug e-mail and calendaring into users' favourite e-mail packages like Eudora and Microsoft Outlook. The cost per user depends on the number of licences with the server version priced at around £400.
- scalability – most e-mail applications can be readily extended and scaled. If you can, it makes sense for the whole team to adopt the same application. However, this may not always be practical, particularly if your team works across organisational boundaries.

If e-mail virtual teamworking proves successful, you can then look at more advanced options like extranets or a Virtual Private Network. For more information on Virtual Teamworking by e-mail and other technologies, visit www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice.





Best practice in: Technology
Sector: Engineering
Size of firm: 170 employees
Location: Leeds
Website: www.delap-and-waller.com



Delap & Waller Consulting Engineers

Delap & Waller's strategic approach to e-business has fundamentally reshaped its entire business model – from internal processes to relationships with clients.

The company, which provides multi-disciplinary engineering consultancy, recognised that technology could improve information sharing between staff in various offices and with architects. This would streamline business processes and provide a speedier, more efficient service for clients.

The engineering business has traditionally revolved around partnership between customers, suppliers and trading partners. With investment in a secure client extranet, the company has strengthened these bonds by embracing the concept of collaborative working.

Virtual teams of clients, suppliers and staff now co-operate on projects, streamlining processes and reducing completion times. Administration of all offices is carried out at one site, whilst a company intranet ensures that all staff have access to vital business information. This reduction in duplication of effort has translated into impressive cost savings.

A project hosting service is available via the extranet and allows people to collaborate on designs. Any changes to documents, AutoCAD drawings or specifications are relayed instantly to the right members of staff and suppliers by e-mail to ensure that everyone involved in a project has the most recent drawings at their disposal.

This collaborative approach has unlocked knowledge and expertise within the company, and allowed Delap & Waller to take on a wider variety of projects and win new business from a range of clients. The combination of cost savings and new business has had a positive effect on the company's bottom line. Profits have increased over the last three years, a fact Managing Director Liam O'Hagan attributes in part to technology: "Technology has certainly given us the edge with many blue-chip clients and has brought in contracts that we wouldn't have been able to handle without investment."

Doing it right



REGAINING CONTROL

With increasing reliance on e-mail and a growing amount of spam, businesses need to manage their e-mail systems to prevent becoming overwhelmed by the volume.

The first step is to get a firewall set up to filter spam and identify potentially virus-infected e-mails. This will slash the quantity of incoming e-mail.

Many larger companies are also trying to reduce the amount of e-mail they generate by encouraging sensible use. Although e-mail is an exceptionally useful tool, it is just one part of a communications toolkit. Some matters, for example, are resolved quicker by telephone or face-to-face discussion.

Finally, to reduce the size of in-boxes and cut down on wasted storage space, many businesses encourage staff to send links to where documents or presentations are stored, rather than send the actual file itself.

GUARDING AGAINST MISUSE

While e-mail is often considered disposable, careless or even libellous remarks by e-mail can prove very damaging to companies.

E-mail can easily be sent to the wrong person accidentally, or forwarded on, and is virtually impossible to delete or retract. It is also covered by the Data Protection Act, which means that customers can demand copies of any e-mail containing personal data on them, even if only sent internally. (In recent years, several large companies have been successfully sued for libelling their customers by e-mail). It is therefore vital that companies have written e-mail policies.

Written policies on the use of company technology are often referred to as Acceptable Usage Policies (AUP) and attached to the standard terms of employment.

An AUP should make employees aware of their responsibilities and spell out whether or not they are permitted to use the internet for their own purposes, including sending and receiving e-mail and visiting websites. And, if there are restrictions on the amount of internet use that is allowed or the times of day that employees may connect to the web, these should be stated.

Most importantly, an AUP should also make it clear that employees must never send or store e-mails that are obscene, racist, sexist, defamatory or in breach of copyright, nor access websites with this kind of inappropriate material.

AVOIDING VIRUSES

Despite the enormous publicity that accompanies an outbreak, businesses are still falling prey to computer viruses, which can cost an extraordinary amount of money in lost productivity. Despite the efforts of IT support staff to filter out viruses, the commonest cause of problems is still staff carelessly opening e-mail attachments.

Again, education is essential. Most viruses are not particularly complex – they rely on people opening 'executable' files (files that contain a programme rather than just data). Training on which types of files to avoid opening and on the ways viruses try to pass themselves off as authentic can provide a valuable second line of security should they slip through your IT defences.

To read more about the legal aspects of technology, read our *Technology and the law* factsheet – you can find it on our website. For more about firewalls and information security, visit www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/technology/security.htm

Further help and advice

Achieving best practice in your business is a key theme within DTI's approach to business support solutions, providing ideas and insights into how you can improve performance across your business. By showing what works in other businesses, we can help you see what can help you, and then support you in implementation.

ACHIEVING BEST PRACTICE IN YOUR BUSINESS

To access free information and publications on best practice:

- visit our website at www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice
- call the DTI Publications Orderline on 0870 150 2500 or visit www.dti.gov.uk/publications

SUPPORT TO IMPLEMENT BEST BUSINESS PRACTICE

To get help bringing best practice to your business, contact Business Link – the national business advice service. Backed by the DTI, Business Link is an easy-to-use business support and information service, which can put you in touch with one of its network of experienced business advisers.

- Visit the Business Link website at www.businesslink.gov.uk
- Call Business Link on 0845 600 9 006

MORE BEST PRACTICE

The following publications are available free from our website or by calling the DTI orderline on 0870 150 2500:

- Broadband (URN 04/644)
- Mobile working (URN 04/759)
- Wireless communications (URN 04/651)
- Technology, customers and suppliers (URN 04/816)
- Integrating back office systems factsheet – you can find it on our website (04/643).

BROADBAND

ADSLguide.co.uk offers independent comparisons of broadband services www.adslguide.org.uk

The UK Broadband Task Force is a DTI body working to give the UK the most extensive and competitive broadband market in the G7 by 2005. www.broadband.gov.uk

GENERAL BUSINESS ADVICE

You can also get a range of general business advice from the following organisations:

England

- Call Business Link on 0845 600 9 006
- Visit the website at www.businesslink.gov.uk

Scotland

- Call Business Gateway on 0845 609 6611
- Visit the website at www.bgateway.com

Wales

- Call Business Eye/Llygad Busnes on 08457 96 97 98
- Visit the website at www.busesseye.org.uk

Northern Ireland

- Call Invest Northern Ireland on 028 9023 9090
- Visit the website at www.investni.com

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