

Technology for the Sole Practitioner

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SUMMARY

For those who own small firms, work/life balance is often difficult to maintain. To address this challenge, Gary Schuberth invested in a server that provided him access to his office computers while he was on the road. As a result, he has seen dramatic improvement in both his communication methods and the functionality of his practice.

THE CHALLENGE

At this point in my career I don't want a traditional office, lease space, permanent employees (been there, done that). Instead, I use contract help. As I am the primary client contact, keeping the practice running when I was out of town was a struggle. I found it cumbersome to transfer cross-referenced files back and forth to my contractors. I had to solve these issues on a sole-practitioner budget and without adding to my frustration. I decided I needed a second (or more) work station and remote access to my files for the times that I was away from the office on vacation or otherwise.

THE SOLUTION

I invested in a server system with the capability to provide access to my office computers while on the road. The server's software allows access to my office desktop as well as the main server from my laptop from any location through Internet accessibility. Now when a client calls with a quick question about a drawing or detail, I can open the file and respond to it as if I were in the office.

THE DETAILS

I purchased a Dell server; the minimum Microsoft Server Workgroup Software handles five stations, which is enough to keep me going for quite a while. So far, I am very pleased with this software—it is a professional software package that allows remote access from other computers and can sync my calendar and e-mails with my Treo cell phone.

I want a practice that is flexible and built around my personal work-live home-office setup, and this server has fulfilled that want. The server plots and prints to

the office when I am off site. Work-demand peaks can be leveled without the need to permanently increase staff and lease larger amounts of space. And as long as I don't have critical meetings, I can go on that overdue ski trip with the kids or away on business and keep the office moving forward. If I get a call to make a quick change to a drawing, I can do so, e-mail the file to my printer, and send it for delivery that same day, all while I'm out of the office.

My other driver for this purchase was to be able to hire contract workers and have them work from their home offices, as my space is limited. The server enables easy file sharing. They can grab a file, work on it, drop it back in the CAD folder, and I can print and check it. I am happy to be able to say that I truly have a virtual office now.

And more importantly, this purchase did not send the firm into debt. I purchased my server through a three-year lease, at about \$200 per month with full ownership after three years.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT

When I purchased the server, I consulted with a group called Tech Guys, a local firm. I studied the options for about a year. Waiting worked to my advantage since computers improve and get faster over time.

The setup required about a week, and it did not stop office workflow. I also had another expert come in who made sure that the CAD software was working correctly, particularly regarding printing.

The only change in my work habits: I save more files digitally, even memos, so that they are accessible online. The server also has very good backup capabilities; I sleep better knowing it is taken care of. A server system enables sole proprietors or small office principals to take more frequent and longer vacations without critical work coming to halt.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Gary Schubert of Schubert Architecture Inc. in Lenexa, Kans., has been a licensed architect since 1982, working with a variety of projects and client types. He brings success to his clients by leveraging skills with business and real estate development as well as architectural, graphic, and product design. His current clients range from hotels and restaurant chains, to individual developers, business owners, and homeowners. This variety of clientele keeps his workload consistent and full. He looks forward to the next creative challenge and the further evolution of his business.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 10.04.06 BIM Transition in a Small Firm
- 10.04.02 Getting Started with BIM
- 10.01.08 Project Records Retention

For More Information on This Topic

See also “Virtual Design and Construction: New Opportunities for Leadership” by James R. Bedrick, AIA, *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice, Update 2006*, p. 33.



See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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Key Terms

- Practice
- Information management
- Computer communications
- Networking