

Managing IT in a Tight Economy

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President, Ministry Business Services, Inc.

Reprinted from *Christian Computing Magazine*

The economy has taken a serious downturn. There's no more disputing that fact, and it's affecting church and ministry budgets. Are there some things you can do to keep your computer system stability and reliability growing when finances are tight? I think so.

It's true of churches and ministries like it is everywhere else: when budgets are growing, waste is more prevalent. That's not a judgment on our stewardship; it's just that we're focusing on tasks that sometimes keep us from being able to look for the best economic strategy. The good news is that in this tight economy there are some ways we can cut expenses without cutting quality, reliability, or impact.

Hardware

This a good time to re-examine hardware strategies. While doing so an important question to ask is, "Are we making hardware decisions that increase our overall IT costs without providing additional benefits?" Here are some areas where re-focusing may save you money:

- Churches and ministries are often donated used hardware—computers, monitors, switches, printers, etc. When we receive them, we feel we need to be sincerely grateful and employ the resources just received. However, consider the following:
 - The donors of the used hardware rarely purchase new equipment to give us. Rather, they usually donate equipment they are replacing or want to get rid of. If it's equipment that can't serve them well, why do we feel we need to make it serve our teams?
 - Used equipment is almost always out of warranty, which means we need to support failing components. Failed hard drives, motherboards, etc all take time to support, and the cost associated with maintaining them is the cost of personnel or vendors. The result of deploying such hardware is usually decreased team productivity (because they're older, slower systems) and increased support costs.
- To run at peak efficiency and reliability, today's networks require a lot of servers. Those servers each have associated purchase and support costs, and each uses a bunch of electricity. Fortunately, the technology that allows most of them to be "virtualized" is mature and often free!
 - "Virtual servers" is still a new concept to most. The best way to picture it is to think about partitioning a hard drive. When you do so, the computer makes it look like you have multiple drives, but you really only have one. Virtualizing a server is very similar in that you configure the computer to "partition" it's processing, communicating, and memory. In effect, the computer you once called a server becomes a host for multiple servers!
 - There are a few publishers of software that allows a computer to become a server host. Though very large ministries need the more capable versions of this software, which have a moderate price tag, most are able to do all they need with the free versions! Our favorite producer of this genre of software, called hypervisors, is VMware (www.vmware.com). They have been doing it the longest and their software works. Microsoft is now in it's second generation of it's hypervisor software, and may eventually take over the niche... but VMware is the best solution for now.
 - The benefit of Virtualizing can be a significant reduction in the number of physical servers, which translates to saved dollars when purchasing replacement equipment. Fewer physical servers also means less electricity consumption, making your organization more green.

Outsourcing

IT expertise is expensive to hire because we're competing with the salaries and benefits offered by most corporations. Many churches and ministries have been moving their top IT positions to outsource firms like ours (www.mbsinc.com) because it saves them money. This makes even more sense in a downturned economy.

- *What about using the increased number of volunteers resulting from higher unemployment?* We see many try this, but it rarely produces the results they want. Those volunteers will continue looking for work and will no longer be available to serve at the same level once hired, requiring a replacement volunteer. And each person brought in to oversee IT brings their own strategy, which puts your team in a state of constant flux.
- *Should we outsource the entire department?* Unless you are a smaller ministry staff, probably not. By only outsourcing the higher level responsibility of IT strategy and implementation you're able to hire a help desk person without that higher-level experience; and that salary will usually be at a lower cost to the organization. It also makes the organization less vulnerable to employee turnover, injecting a high level of stability to the system.

Credentialing

Economic downturns usually include higher unemployment. To ensure those on your team know what they need to while serving your organization, consider credentialing them in the solutions you rely upon. And if you're the one who would get credentialled, consider that doing so makes you more valuable to your organization.

Shameless Plug

Credentialing programs can be found associated with the hardware and software most of us use. There is a new one I'd like to mention that helps IT people better understand how to use their IT knowledge and skills more accurately in the church and ministry environment. It is Ministry Technology Institute (www.ministry-tech.com), and is an online training institution Steve Hewitt, *Christian Computing Magazine* Editor-in-Chief, and I started last year. We help turn IT people into ministry IT specialists so they can guide their organization more accurately through strategic decisions.

Managing IT well in an economic downturn is challenging. These are a few ways we can do so well... with the goal of hearing at the end our journey, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt 25:21 NIV)

Nick Nicholaou is president of MBS, a consulting firm specializing in ministry computer networks, operational policies, and CPA services. You can reach Nick via email (nick@mbsinc.com) and may want to check out his firm's website (www.mbsinc.com) and his unofficial blog at <http://ministry-it.blogspot.com>.