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5 smart green ways to save money for your business

By Heather Clancy

Skeptics suggest an economic crisis will stall sustainable business practices. They cling to the myth that going green costs more money. But many businesses are discovering green habits save big money, especially when it comes to information technology.

The savings are many: Reduced power consumption, IT maintenance and hardware procurement costs. This can lead to increased productivity.

You say your technology strategy isn't sophisticated? No worries. Here are five ways you can make it greener and budget friendly.

Tip 1: Adopt a power management strategy

The simplest way to kick start your green IT strategy is by embracing technology policies for energy consumption, not just software and security updates, says Jennifer Mazzanti, president and cofounder of eMazzanti Technology, an IT services company in Hoboken, N.J.

[Windows Vista](#), for example, has features that shut down system resources when they're not in use. Windows 7 goes even further. In tests of these features, Mazzanti was able to extend the life of a battery on an older laptop from 4.5 hours to 6 hours.

There are plenty of third-party software applications available to set up and manage power policies, such as shutting down all desktop computers after they've been idle for a specific amount of time or turning them off after hours.

What's more, Microsoft is encouraging hardware and software vendors to accommodate this more easily, Mazzanti says.

Why is saving power such a big deal? By some estimates, there is roughly \$2.8 billion a year wasted in the United States on electricity being sent to unused or under-utilized IT equipment. Aside from increased productivity, such as the extended battery life, energy policies can save an average of \$36 a year per desktop computer, according to some estimates.

The best way to get a handle on what you can save is understanding what your company uses now. The simplest way to do this is by investing in a power strip that monitors electricity usage and provides a report on trends, says Rick Talbot of Baudry Cybernomics, a green IT consulting company in Toronto.

John Smart, principal at Host2Help.com, an Internet hosting company in Eugene, Ore., has taken things a step further by enabling low-power settings in all the hardware across his organization, even his phones. Also, he has invested in power distribution boards that help his company make sure that peripherals associated with an idled or power-down computer are also shut off. Electronics can use from 25 percent to 40 percent of the power they use at full capacity when they are shut off.

Some power strips sense when the computer is off and power down monitors, printers and drives accordingly, preventing them from drawing electricity in their idle state. These strips usually cost more, but the return on that investment is quick, Smart said.

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Tip 2: Consolidate servers

Power considerations also apply to servers your business uses for applications such as e-mail or client databases, Talbot notes.

The good news is one of today's biggest technology trends, server virtualization, can have a profound impact on improving energy efficiency.

As an example, Canadian retailer, Roots, has reduced its server power consumption by about 400 percent by moving away from buying a new dedicated server for every database application and instead installing [virtualization software](#), which allows the company to run several different applications on one physical piece of server hardware.

Often, when a server is dedicated to just one task, it can sit idle and waste energy. Yet, even while idle, servers use between 70 and 80 percent of the electricity consumed when fully utilized. So, it's in your company's best interest to look for ways to use existing servers more productively before going out and buying new ones. Virtualization software can help.

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Tip 3: Discourage printing

Many businesses rely on fax machines and printed materials. This negatively impacts the environment and budgets, too.

Ponder what it takes to send a traditional fax. First, you print out a document. Then you beam it to the recipient where it is spit out on paper. Two pieces of paper are used just to send one simple page.

FaxCore, a company that sells faxing software, has calculated that between the cost of postage, paper, envelopes and processing (i.e. the humans stuffing and preparing the envelopes), you can save \$830 a mailing per document by opting to go electronic. (This assumes the average communication is roughly two pages in length.)

Energy Star, the government agency that tracks power consumption for electronic devices, rates fax machines among the most energy-intensive machines. Mostly, they sit around turned on doing nothing. The same goes for printers.

Host2Help's Smart bought a new printer when he upgraded to [Windows Vista](#). Although he wasn't strictly thinking green, the new Hewlett-Packard printer that he bought has power management options and other features-such as automatic support for double-sided printing-that have helped him save up to \$40 per month on his electricity costs.

Smart also encourages his staff to cut back on unnecessary paper waste by posting "Think before you print" signs near printers and he is buying recycled paper for everyday use. Recycled paper costs more, but the difference can be made up in double-sided printing.

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Tip 4: Consider lifecycle when purchasing equipment

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Philosophically speaking, small-business owners interested in adopting green practices need to begin applying "green math" to their technology budgets. So instead of looking at the price tag for a piece of equipment, you should ask questions about power consumption, materials used to assemble it, and basic recycling or asset disposal policies offered by the vendor. This will be your true cost of ownership for a piece of technology.

[Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool](#) is a great source for ratings. Energy Star is working on criteria for more sophisticated equipment, including server hardware.

Sometimes, the price tag for a "greener" piece of equipment is higher on the surface, but when these other factors are considered, it is more cost-effective than less-expensive options. "There is a range of price for every product. You just need to know your price range," says Diane MacEachern, founder and CEO of Big Green Purse and author of "Big Green Purse: Use Your Spending Power to Create a Cleaner, Greener World."

No one is suggesting that you buy new equipment. Sometimes energy savings from a new piece of hardware may not justify the purchase, says Bob Houghton, president and CEO of Redemtech, an IT asset disposition company. Sometimes the best strategy for a small-business owner may be to extend the lifecycle of some equipment while swapping out the least energy-efficient machines.

"You need to evaluate the whole footprint of your business," says Anand Pallegar, founder and president of atLarge, an Internet advertising agency in Sarasota, Fla., that put in place a "Be Green" environmental pledge in 2008 when it moved into a new facility.




Now atLarge has embraced a large spectrum of green policies. It uses an Internet hosting provider that buys only the greenest servers, prints on both sides of a sheet of paper, uses whiteboards in its conference room to capture ideas and share them digitally and is looking at replacing traditional hard drives with solid state storage options to cut power consumption.

None of these practices, by themselves, cost more than traditional alternatives, especially when you take into account factors such as power consumption and ongoing management. But taken together, they have a huge impact on the environment and bottom line.

Heather Clancy is an award-winning business journalist and high-tech communications strategist who has covered technology for more than 20 years. She writes frequently about small-business technology issues and contributes to the [GreenTech Pastures](#) blog about technology and the environment on ZDNet. She can be reached via e-mail at heather@heatherclancy.com

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