

Ever-evolving IT essential to success

> While often the easy target of cuts, systems shouldn't be sacrificed during a downturn. Instead, sound judgment and creativity should prevail.

While many in our industry and beyond have seen 2009 as the year of budget cuts and layoffs, **Traffic Planning and Design, Inc (TPD)** in Pottstown, PA, a 125-person consulting engineering firm, has branded 2009 as the year of sound judgment and creativity.

Sound judgment and creativity means no cuts to information technology.

While there is definitely a concerted effort to reduce spending, including in IT, we will not sacrifice work flow efficiency

or the job security of our staff, our most vital resource.

When considering budget reductions, IT is typically targeted due to the Samarisword-style cuts that can be made based on the size of the expenditures. This is a poor area of focus, as IT is not a one-time investment that can be cut off.

IT is ever-evolving and once you are leveraging it, it becomes a cost of doing business, as the tools provided become integral in the business workflow and collaborative efforts of the firm. Instead, being creative with new initiatives, as well as being prudent with capital decisions, can allow IT to continue to provide the tools the staff depends on.

For instance, changing the lifecycle of workstations from three to four years has saved TPD more than \$112,000 this year, while reducing the annual workstation replacement schedule by 24% annually. This decision was made possible by TPD's continued goal of purchasing higher-end workstations.

Other sound investments over the past few years, such as *VMware*, have allowed us to continue to upgrade our servers according to, and in some cases, ahead of their lifecycle end dates. This has also

allowed TPD to upgrade core user systems such as Microsoft *Exchange*, Bentley's *Microstation* suite of products, and numerous other engineering applications. Currently, 19 of our 25 servers are virtual. Another key area of focus for IT this year has been vendor relations and attention to detail. It becomes very easy to sign long-term contracts for Internet, phone, network, and equipment and then forget about them until they expire. We've found that this has been a major area of immediate, as well as continued, cost savings.

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By taking the time to analyze invoices, we have recouped \$28,000 in various incorrect charges, along with reducing our monthly recurring costs by \$2,600. This savings has included wide-format equipment contract restructuring, as well as the aforementioned services.

In the process, ask the following questions: Do you have more phone lines than you need? Are you getting the most competitive rates? When was the last time you shopped your services, or your copier and plotter contracts? How does your firm handle cell phones? Are your vendors charging you nominal fees such as "invoice media paper," "admin fee," etc.? Are you leveraging your account value to deal with vendors? Can you combine equipment or service usage to reach higher rate tiers?

Answering the above questions is most definitely worth the time and occasional aggravation to find these cost savings.

A third key strategic objective for IT has been to increase the collaboration with

the staff to learn more about business processes, make suggestions on how technology might be able to improve efficiency, and be a resource in completing other operational initiatives.

At TPD, the most notable of these initiatives is the continued investment in developing custom engineering software to help differentiate the quality and proficiency of our services from those of our competitors.

Software development has allowed us to cut parts of the design process by as much as 90% (from seven hours, down to 15 minutes) while also providing a level of quality assurance and quality control. The engineering staff has grasped the potential time savings, as well as accuracy, and is lining up processes to be evaluated for future development.

Perhaps the least envious, yet nonetheless important task, during this slow time has been updating and creating documentation on IT policies, procedures and any other intellectual property, so that there is no single point of failure within the IT Team. This strengthens the foundation further for when business picks up again.

When analyzing the acronym IT, *information* comes before *technology* for a reason. The information must come from the business and staff before it can be translated into a technology strategy. It is paramount that technology is considered only after information is collected, processed, and communicated.

Otherwise, the fissure between IT and the business will never be bridged. Bottom line for 2009: TPD has made no sacrifices or cutbacks with regard to information technology, while also trimming spending by approximately 6%. ■

Karl Fischer is the information technology manager at **Traffic Planning and Design, Inc.** (Pottstown, PA). Contact him at kfischer@trafficpd.com.

