

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

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Technology and the Small Business

In the past ten years thousands of new technology tools, software solutions, web solutions and products have emerged and changed the way people and business interact. Some of us have engaged these new technology marvels with bravado...others have simply chosen to utilize these technology advancements to enhance their current lifestyle. What does this all mean? As a person we can choose what technology products we want in our lives. Unless, the business you work for decides to use more technology products or tools in your work environment. As an employee, you are obligated to try and use a new technology solution. In a medium to large corporation employees are familiar with changes in their technology environments. For a small business and the people who like working in a small business environment, this type of change is not necessarily embraced. Sometimes, small business people are not even aware that products or solutions are available to them.

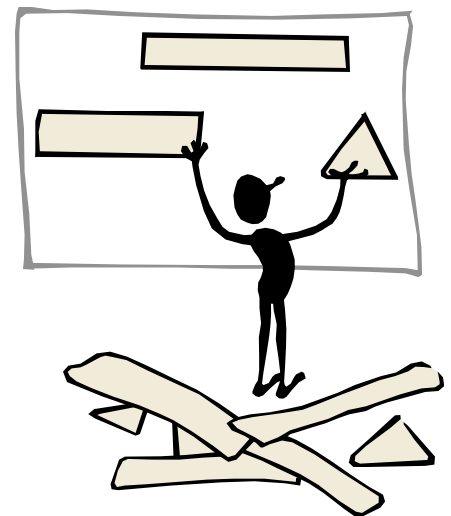
Recently, Ted Wendel and Karl Wondrak met with a two person company looking for a "better way" to manage their business operations. Ted suggested they investigate commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) tools or application solutions available in their industry. Both of them remarked that their industry is small and really there were no specific applications they had heard of for their type of busi-

ness. Ted smiled and asked if they had searched the web for any solutions. They both remarked that neither of them had even considered the web as a source for their specific needs.



In a few days Ted found several web based and server based solutions that definitely could offer solutions to manage any business operations more efficiently. One company, Starta Development (<http://www.startadevelopment.com>), provided a web based solution for a reasonable cost. This solution could be utilized by any company needing a better way to manage project based implementations with lots of documentation and interface also with multiple outside entities. The solution could effectively manage a lawyers office, as well as, residential, commercial or apartment developers. The more we studied the Starta Development solution, the more we began to realize how this web based solution could benefit a variety of small to medium size corporate environments.

The World Wide Web has changed the marketplace and made products and services available to everyone anywhere. All a person needs is access and a creative mind to think of different ways to manage their business operations. In a small or medium business environment, these new tools can be utilized without a need for new computers, software or extensive development requirements. At the same time, a company will benefit from enhancements without paying for additional maintenance fees. Once you select an online software company, the setup time and cost is usually minimal. All you really need is training on how to use the software. This type of online service provider has been referred to as an application service provider (ASP), Software as a Service (SaaS) or On Demand computing.



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So, why are some small or medium size companies fearful of such solutions? The answer probably lies somewhere between acceptance of change and reluctance to adapt to a new technology environment. There is also a concern of working with a company who maybe out of state, or possibly, out of the country. People like working with people they can talk too, meet with and develop a relationship with on a one on one basis. When you work with another company in a different city or state, you are limited at first with using the telephone and email for communication. Several years ago, with the emergence of online shopping, people were at first reluctant to "buy" over the internet. Now, it has become quite acceptable especially if you purchase brand name products, or need a specialty product which is not available locally in stores.



As a business owner considering the need to enhance their operations, technology environment, sales market, or any functional entity in their business environment...the plethora of online business solutions is something to consider. This change could dramatically improve and change their business model for success which they never considered. For example, in 1997 a small sporting goods

company in Missouri decided to investigate the opportunity to develop an online catalogue of their products. They built a web site and advertised this new site in several outdoor magazines. Eleven years later, they have moved from the small retail outlet to a 150,000 square foot facility. They are now making sales and sending shipments all over the world. The tremendous increase in sales revenue dramatically changed their business model. Besides their online catalogue of products, they now own several companies which provide products for the sportsmen and sports-women around the world. This all started with a small business owner who wanted to improve their operations and sales market. I am sure they never envisioned the outcome which derived from their willingness to try a new technology.

As a business owner where should you begin? If you have the time, a web search is a good place to begin the exploration. If you do not have the time, you can have your staff perform the investigation. The next option is to hire a consultant you trust to begin the exploration and investigation of what is available. It does not matter which way you begin, the key to a successful investigation is dependent upon a clear strategy of *what* you want to accomplish. For example, if you're looking for ways to improve the processes in operations, you need to define and document business process first. There maybe simple changes in the process that could dramatically change both efficiency and provide cost savings. A qualified and experienced business process analyst can perform the analysis faster than usually expected. Then, when you review online applications and their functionality you can compare what you want, with what exists and how the application can support your strategy.

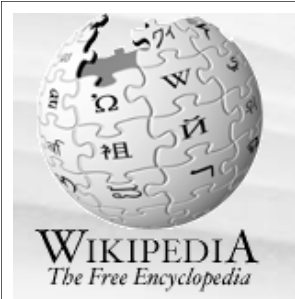
The idea that a small or medium size business could utilize new online technology solutions is not a new concept. For some it is simply their willing-

ness to embrace a new approach. If you are interested in learning more about how you can benefit from an online solution, please contact the MINCON Group for a free consultation.

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USING THE INTERNET FOR RESEARCH



Commercial, off-the-shelf (COTS) is a term for [software](#) or [hardware](#), generally technology or computer products, that are ready-made and available for sale, lease, or license to the general public. They are often used as alternatives to in-house developments.

The motivation for using COTS components is that they will reduce overall system development costs and involve less development time because the components can be bought instead of being developed from scratch. Many considered COTS to be the [Silver bullet](#) during the nineties, but COTS development came with many not-so-obvious tradeoffs - overall cost and development time can definitely be reduced, but often at the expense of an increase in software component integration work and a dependency on a third-party component vendor. The extra integration work and modifications often required have led to the joke that COTS really means *custom* off-the-shelf.

In Karl's article he said how I searched the Web for information on what applications are available to meet a specific business need. As everyone know, the internet contains just about everything, its how to get at it that sometime boggles the mind. I thought I might take this space this month to go over a few of the processes and tools I use to do research on the web.

First, search engines. Google (www.google.com) is the most common, Microsofts Live Search (www.live.com) is another good resource. And for some reason I still use Ask (www.ask.com), I started when it was Ask Jeeves and still continue to use it today. The thing with search engines is to know what to ask for. Lets say I was looking for applications that can help with keeping the books for a small business. If I enter "Book Keeping Software" it would return a vast number of resources to review but using "Small Business Book Keeping Software" will return a better set of items tailored more to my needs. Try and be a specific as possible at first and relax your search or reword your search as necessary.

Another type of tool out there is a "metasearch" engine, this type of tool allows you to search multiple search engines. I would recommend Copernic (www.copernic.com), they have a free agent you can download and install and I would highly recommend using it. The great part about it is that it saves your search and what it found so you can go back to it.

Trade magazines for your industry have multiple advertisements that can lead you to what you are looking for or what you could search for, leverage them. These are but a few of the tools that I use but these are the main ones. You do get better the more searches you perform. Have fun and try Copernic!

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Editors Note:

I have recently re-entered the regular business world as an Information Technology Director with a small organization. I have committed to Karl that I will continue to participate in this newsletter as the editor and as a contributor (largely because I really enjoy it). I have to apologize for not getting this out in January as I have been swamped learning my new position. I promise I will do better for our March 2008 issue.

Ted



Application service provider (ASP)

The need for ASPs has evolved from the increasing costs of specialized software that have far exceeded the price range of small to medium sized businesses. As well, the growing complexities of software have led to huge costs in distributing the software to end-users. Through ASPs, the complexities and costs of such software can be cut down. In addition, the issues of upgrading have been eliminated from the end-firm by placing the onus on the ASP to maintain up-to-date services, 24 x 7 technical support, physical and electronic security and in-built support for [business continuity](#) and [flexible working](#).

The importance of this marketplace is reflected by its size. [As of early 2003](#), estimates of the [United States](#) market range from 1.5 to 4 billion dollars. Clients for ASP services include businesses, government organizations, non-profits, and membership organizations.



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The **MINCON Group** publishes this "Monthly Newsletter" containing a variety of articles which describes actual business issues. These articles are written by us for our clients, the affiliates and the industry.

We also participate in public speaking engagements. A list of speakers and suggested topics is listed in our Services section on our web site.



UPCOMING IN OUR MARCH ISSUE

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