

IT Self Audit: 26 Steps to the Ultimate IT Environment

It goes without saying that businesses depend more and more on their IT systems. From operations and payroll to customer communications and payment systems, the benefit of a secure, robust IT environment is immense.

As the global business environment goes through increasingly rapid changes, there are 26 essential areas that every business must review - regularly - to ensure they can reap the rewards of their IT investments. Some are surprisingly easy, while others are definitely best left to the experts.



Security

It would be easy to think that only the big-name organisations are targets for cyber criminals, but in today's environment, no business can afford to take a chance – and they don't have to. The best practices of the world's most secure organisations can translate into methods that work for all kinds of workplaces. IT security is a specialised area, and one of the fastest changing – but there are many simple measures that can be taken to keep your systems safe.

1. Antivirus

There are many antivirus products on the market today, but they are definitely not all created equally. The essentials that you should look for include strong reporting functionality with alerts on potential issues. Central management is a must. With a modern, mobile workforce, cloud most often works out to be the best option, giving a broader reach and lower administration time.

2. Spam protection

Spammers are increasing in both ingenuity and volume, so making a good anti-spam choice is a time and sanity saver, as well as preventing risk. Clear inboxes help your people to work more efficiently, while unwelcome intrusion is kept at bay. The right solution should give you very high accuracy, and near-zero spam messages. This is one of those situations where proven results are worth more than any number of sales promises; ask the hard questions and be prepared to walk away if the answers are not forthcoming.

3. HR processes

Making sure the right people have access to the right systems is vital and the opposite is also true. Whether introducing new staff to a business, or adjusting to meet changes in roles and responsibilities of existing staff, HR should have strong processes in place to ensure the correct permissions are granted to staff, and are communicated to the IT department. This step avoids unwanted access, and prevents destruction or theft of data. Managing permissions, and making sure employees can access the systems they need, can also ensure the right hardware is purchased without waste.

4. Gateway security and content control

Gives you the power to block nasty sites and malicious or unsafe content. By monitoring or reducing access to illegal or un-suitable websites, your environment, people and customers are better protected.

5. Password management

In spite of best education efforts, there are still an astonishing number of easily guessed or cracked passwords in use. By insisting on complex passwords that are regularly reset, you avoid becoming a soft target. It is vital that everyone in your business has a separate password, and that there is no sharing of logins. To add to security, password vaults should be used to securely store company and personal passwords.

6. Admin access

It is best practice to avoid adding admin access to day-to-day user accounts. IT administrators or capable admin staff should be assigned a separate login to perform IT admin tasks. Avoiding the high-risk practice of users having local administration rights on desktop also improves protection. This combination is key to keeping your IT environment safe and virus-free.

Data Protection

Your data is probably one of the most valuable non-human assets your organisation has. The data gathered over years of business also represents a real opportunity, so it makes sense to take good care of it. A good technology partner should be able to help you to establish a reliable backup system that does most of the work for you.

7. Backup

Imagine switching on your laptop, only to find that every file you've created and every email you've sent is gone. With a good backup system in place, that doesn't have to be a catastrophe – in fact, your business can continue with most users and customers not noticing anything happened.

Backups are critical, yet we find a majority of businesses have unsuitable practises in place. In some cases, critical data is missed in the backup, while in others, backups are not working at all. The good news is that recent technology developments make very reliable, automated backup options an affordable prospect that saves enormous time and stress. Chances are, they will also save money as a result.

8. Offsite

Locating backups physically offsite is a must (or at the least, a VERY fire proof and waterproof safe that is locked). A combination of onsite and offsite backup is best, giving the right mix of convenience and protection. In less dramatic situations such as a missing file or a failed server, onsite restores are quick, but when facing a major disaster, offsite backups will save your business from significant disruption.

9. Reporting

In a busy environment, checking reports is a vital job that can easily get overlooked. It is a task that must be allocated to an individual in the organisation, who is then made responsible for reviewing and actioning in the event of an error. Fixing backup errors must be prioritised, with close monitoring to ensure successful correction of the issue.

10. Disaster recovery

Do you have a plan if your organisation experiences a server failure; theft of the server or backups; power or building outage; or a natural disaster like fire, flood or cyclone? Every business leader should consider how long the business can run without access to IT systems. Given that, for most, the phones, payroll and client communication depend on IT systems, rapid access is usually a necessity. As part of any disaster recovery review, it pays to consider support contracts and legal obligations. Any plan should encompass a regular test cycle, and independent audits should be considered.

11. Data retention and backup periods

For every business, the level of acceptable data loss is different. While data gathered by a bank in mere moments can be worth millions of dollars, other, less technology-dependent businesses could survive more significant periods of data loss. This is an area where it pays not to make assumptions – working with a trusted technology partner, you should be able to make a solid assessment of your data recovery needs.

Questions you may ask include:

- > How acceptable is loss of data - 1 week, 1 day, 1 hour, 1 minute or none?
- > How many days, weeks, months or years will be recoverable should data be lost?
- > What is an acceptable time to wait for a file to be restored, or a server to be back online after it has failed?

Procurement and lifecycle management

Given that technology forms a considerable portion of business expenditure, it is reasonable to want the best possible return on investment. Let's face it, anyone procuring IT products is bombarded by more advertising than a department store at Christmas, and false economies abound. Here are some considerations to help avoid being lured by deals that are too good to be true:

12. Consistent and reliable brand and model

Choose a well-known vendor, and do some research on reliability, performance and known issues. It is far easier to support one model, or a small selection, rather than dozens of completely different machines – and support difficulties end up costing time and, often money.

13. Warranties with onsite service

The cost of your staff member unplugging a faulty machine, driving to the shops and waiting in line for a repair that may take days or weeks, is likely to be higher than the difference between on-site and off-site warranty. Onsite business warranties are a must, and genuine manufacturer warranties are more than worth it for the service and knowledge advantages they bring.

14. Correct specifications

There is little more frustrating for users than to be allocated a machine that is inadequate for the tasks they perform in their daily work. Choosing the wrong machine doesn't only impact the user performance; it also shortens the usable life of the device, sometimes relegating it to the rubbish heap. Plan ahead, and get the right advice. Check with software vendors about compatibility, and ensure the right version of software is included.

15. Replacement

Wrestling with obsolete machines is ultimately costly, and impacts user productivity and morale. Businesses should budget to replace desktops, servers and networking equipment within five years. Running most electronic devices past 5 years leads to a far greater risk of failure and performance issues.



Cost Control

When you manage costs, and identify inefficiencies, you are able to stretch your budget further. There are a few practices that pay off for any organisation:

16. Single point of contact

One of the biggest inefficiencies in many organisations is duplication of cost and effort on projects. Having a single point of contact builds an internal knowledge base, and avoids doubling up on expenditure.

17. Pass technology invoices via the IT manager or technology partner

All invoices should be reviewed to make sure they are correct, suitable for the business and the right value. We have encountered many organisations that have continued to rubber-stamp payments for services that are no longer relevant, or failing to meet their needs. In fact, it is surprising how many businesses pay for a managed service and then find themselves taking responsibility for the bulk of the effort in maintaining and supporting their IT systems. Make sure you are getting what you pay for.

18. Regular maintenance

As a child, you probably learned the saying that 'a stitch in time saves nine'. This concept is as true in IT as anywhere, where proactive maintenance inevitably saves costs long term. In particular, Windows and other software updates are critical to keeping your IT running smoothly and virus free. Monitoring software that alerts you to potential issues is the best proactive support you can buy and it is inexpensive to buy, and quick to implement.

19. Staff wages

People are the biggest cost for most businesses, and unstable or unsuitable IT prevents you from getting the best value from the people you hire. Solid IT systems also present the right professional image to your customers, ensuring you do not miss opportunities.

20. Build an IT budget

While a busy business environment can give little time for planning beyond the immediate future, planning out your five-year technology cycle can offer good returns on your time. This will help you to maintain an IT asset register, and consider the payment methods that best suit your cash flow.

21. A long-term IT budget

Is a vital step in planning any successful move to cloud services, without losing existing investments such as software licencing. This is a situation where it can pay to seek help from your technology partner; they should have strong vendor relationships that help build successful migration roadmaps and obsolescence into your budget.

22. Look at department spending

In most businesses, IT spending outside the IT department is on the rise. This can miss opportunities for cost breaks on equipment and licencing, or even duplicate expenditure on something the IT department can already provide. Finding a process that includes the IT department can help you to manage costs more efficiently.

Productivity

Every organisation wants to help their people to be productive, and this has a positive impact on employee morale. Providing the right systems and equipment, offering appropriate training and supporting flexible, mobile work practices all offer productivity gains:

23. Internet performance and stability

More and more applications and services are consumed in the cloud and online. While this gives greater flexibility, and supports mobile workers in particular, it exposes flaws in accessibility. One of the key complaints and frustrations is poor internet performance. This is especially common where organisations have moved software or systems to the cloud. Without the right performance and a stable internet connection, moving to cloud services can be a big mistake.

24. Dual screens

Most business run dual screens now, and are seeing some real advantages in productivity for a very small cost.

25. Automate processes for repetitive work

One of the greatest advantages of emerging technologies is its ability to automate less rewarding tasks, freeing staff to divert their energies to activities that offer a greater return. People previously engaged in time-consuming manual tasks can spend more time serving customers, developing services, or collaborating with colleagues.

26. Remote access

Business is demanding, and for many people, it is a challenge to balance work and personal life. Customers expect more regular and instant communication. Remote access is a must have, giving employees the flexibility to thrive in the changing working environment. This means ensuring that people have the right mobile devices to access key systems 24/7, and making it easy for them to work independently.



"An IT audit can be one of the most useful tools for the IT manager. It identifies risks and clearly outlines potential cost savings, as well as alerting businesses to opportunities for more powerful IT services."

Strategy

In the past, the IT department was often distanced from business strategy, but recently this has changed. As technology increasingly becomes a vital part of every business function, it is vital to align the IT plan with business objectives. This requires IT teams to work more closely with management, marketing, operations, logistics and customer service groups.

Not only should your IT strategy reflect this shift in approach – so should your IT audit. In the cloud era, with an increasingly consumer tech-savvy workforce, it is likely that colleagues in functions far removed from IT are bringing devices, buying software subscription, and downloading apps. If your current technology partner is not exploring the security and financial impact of decentralised IT acquisitions, they should be. In some IT audits we've conducted, we have been able to find substantial savings simply by erasing software purchasing double-ups.

The big question

If your IT environment is not operating at peak fitness, what impact is it having on your business? Every one of the 26 points above can, if not adhered to and regularly audited, have a negative impact on your results. Whether lost productivity, missed customer opportunities, increased expenses or lower staff morale, the pain of IT limitations is real. Conversely, the benefits of a healthy environment cannot be dismissed – happy colleagues, satisfied customers and a thriving balance sheet. Our checklist is just some of the key points we consider in every IT audit. If you – or your technology partner – is already reviewing all 26 points, you're undoubtedly feeling the benefits. If not, isn't it time you stopped missing out?

Contact us to learn more about an independent IT audit assessment that get your systems operating at peak efficiency.



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