

Power of one

Escaping the clutches of a demanding boss and running our own business is a dream for many a salary slave. Armed with a single PC, a well-thought-out workspace and a few office essentials, Scott Colvey shows you how to realise your empire-building aspirations



A recent survey by ICM Research reveals nine out of 10 Brits believe they have a great business idea, while 62 percent of us fancy working for ourselves. However the study also shows nearly three-quarters of those interested in setting up a business are put off by lack of experience, advice or funding. A high figure, but is it any surprise?

Conducting small business affairs might seem straightforward. Wheel a filing cabinet into a spare room, wire up a PC and you're ready to roll. Or are you? As many would-be entrepreneurs quickly discover, constructing an effective workplace is rather more complex.

Installing a computer is merely the beginning. All businesses generate paperwork so sooner or later you'll need to add a printer to the office equipment line-up. And if you're dealing with images, a scanner could come in handy. Oh, and don't forget the fax machine: they might be old hat in technology circles but many

firms find it impossible to operate without the ability to send and receive hard copies of documents in facsimile form.

All these essential devices diminish desk space at an alarming rate. You did invest in a nice big desk, didn't you? And a good chair to go with it? You're going to be sat working at a computer all day, so it's really not wise to skimp on comfort and quality. Of course, it goes without saying that your office should reflect the latest ergonomics advice. You don't know your ergonomics from your elbow? Perhaps some help is in order.

Ensuring fine form for a fledgling firm is no mean feat. The things we've mentioned so far barely scratch the surface of beginning in business. Fortunately, *PC Advisor* is here to lend a hand. We can't promise to make your new company a success – that's a job for you and your commercial acumen – but we can help you get off on the right foot. So read on and let's get down to business.

Picking a PC

Don't use setting up a home-based business as an excuse to commandeer the family PC. If you're serious about making your new outfit a success, you need two separate systems: an all-purpose family PC and a dedicated business one.

Few businesses call for fancy graphics, expansive screen or top-notch audio output, so a low-cost PC with a basic specification will suffice. Evesham's Arka Micro C1700E, for example, costs £549 and includes a 1.7GHz Celeron processor, 256MB of memory, 40GB hard disk, 52-speed CD-ROM drive, 17in monitor and built-in ethernet connector.

For a mere £499 ex VAT, Mesh can kit you out with the Matrix XP 2000+, an Athlon XP 2000+-powered PC with 256MB of RAM, 40GB hard disk, 16-speed DVD-ROM drive and a 17in monitor. For the very latest information on entry-level offerings, turn to our Top 10 Superbudget PCs chart on page 240.



Of course, if you can afford to invest in a higher specification PC then do. A zippy processor, plenty of storage and glorious graphics will be as welcome from the outset as any later upgrade. In our Top 10 Power PCs chart on page 232 you'll find systems boasting huge hard disks as well as lightning-speed processors.

Systemax's Reliance 3017 comes armed with two 80GB hard disks and is powered by a 2.4GHz Pentium 4. If it's raw number-crunching ability you need, consider Hi-Grade's 2.8GHz Ultis PV4 2.8 PV10 which achieves the highest WorldBench score in our Power PCs chart (see page 232).

If it's likely that you frequently have to travel for business purposes consider investing in a notebook, either in addition or as an alternative to a desktop PC. These days they're not as expensive as you might think – our Best Buy Budget notebook (see page 246), the Multivision Visage, costs just £979 ex VAT and

includes a 1.8GHz Mobile Pentium 4 processor, 256MB of memory, 30GB hard drive, GeForce4 MX 420 graphics card and a 14.1in display.

Even in the high street, notebook prices have dropped to hard-to-ignore levels. PC World's own-brand Patriot notebook range, for example, starts at just £799 for an Intel Celeron 1.7GHz processor, 128MB of RAM and a 20GB hard drive.

Take note

Don't misinterpret the 'notebook' label as meaning 'portable'. A well-specced 3kg notebook will seem much less attractive once you've lugged it around for a couple of hours. For true portability look for an ultra-slim notebook PC or a PDA (personal digital assistant).

Be warned: lightweight can mean pricey. For instance, Samsung's Q10 TLC 933, which comes with an 866MHz Pentium III processor, 256MB of RAM and a 20GB hard drive, weighs a mere 1.35kg but

costs an extravagant £1,499. Similarly, Sony's £1,619 Vaio C1 features an 867MHz Transmeta processor, 256MB of RAM and a 30GB hard disk but it adds a negligible 988g to the road-warrior's load.

If all you need to do while on the road is manage contacts and appointments and carry mirror images of desktop documents, try an electronic assistant. Our in-depth look at the latest crop of PDAs in December 02's Technofile concluded that Sony's £382 Clie PEG-NR70V and Toshiba's £425 e740 were both great buys at the most versatile end of the market. If you're after a simpler device to do no more than manage contacts and appointments on the move, Palm's m105 does the job for just £67.

Don't buy a PDA just for the sake of it, though. If you need the facilities an electronic organiser offers, fine; otherwise keep the cash in your pocket. When you start up in business, every penny is precious.

Soft options

Microsoft Office is a popular choice for everyday business applications. Office XP Standard edition is £429 inc VAT and includes Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook for word processing, spreadsheet work, presentations and email and contact management. If you need a fancy cataloguing tool then choose the Professional edition which includes the Access database and costs £519 inc VAT.

If you're not too sure what software you need then start cheap and work upwards. Sun's excellent alternative to Microsoft Office, StarOffice 6.0, includes many of the same facilities but costs just £52.99 inc VAT. If your budget won't stretch even that far, then an older version of the same software suite can be downloaded for free from www.openoffice.org.

Hot desks (and cool chairs)

When it comes to office furniture there's no shortage of choice but the dimensions and topography of your intended office space will narrow this down. Note the location of windows and the arc the sun takes across the sky. If one wall is permanently bathed in sunlight it's going to be a bad place to erect a workspace as the bright rays will render the computer's

display effectively invisible. If the sunlit side of the room is the only one where a desk will fit then factor in the cost of a decent set of blinds or prepare to work with the curtains closed. Take it from us, the latter option can have a negative effect on motivation – particularly during summer months.

As ever, the amount you'll need to spend on a desk will depend on your specific needs but remember to opt for lots of surface area. Shelves and drawer pedestals are useful but working life inevitably creates sprawl so avoid form over function.

Take the £89.99 Tall Robo Centre from Argos as an example: its industrial theme is attractive, with tubular supports linking sufficient platforms to plonk a computer base unit, monitor, keyboard, mouse and printer. However, it offers almost no usable workspace: invest in this funky-looking number and you'll end up sorting through paperwork on your lap.

From the same firm comes the rather more functional Manhattan Deep Corner Desk. This £80 unit is designed to fit snugly in an angled area of your office and, along with under-desk shelf space for a computer and printer, there's workspace either side of where the monitor sits.

Computer maintenance

Buying a computer is a big investment and for that reason the machine will be expected to function for several years. For businesses, though, computers are often critical tools and a breakdown can seriously harm the everyday operations of a small firm. That's why it's a good idea to line up onsite service provision.

But be careful – all is not always as it seems. Do not be fooled into thinking that the term 'onsite service' means an all-encompassing maintenance contract. Many computer suppliers now include at-home servicing as part of the deal, but in fact this usually equates to an insurance policy taken out on the buyer's behalf with a third-party maintenance firm.

Sending out an engineer to remedy problems will always be the last resort and before you ever catch sight of a toolbox-bearing expert you'll have to jump through helpline hoops aplenty. You might even end up spending minutes hanging on the end of a premium-rate line. If it's subsequently determined you have a genuine hardware fault (software isn't covered by your PC warranty) an engineer will be scheduled, but you might have to wait days for the next slot. Such frustrations would be intolerable for most business so thoroughly investigate the precise terms of any onsite service deal or maintenance contract. If you're not happy with the findings, discuss alternatives with the supplier: for a fee, most companies will happily upgrade you to a proper maintenance contract with guaranteed response times.



← A notebook is a wiser choice than a desktop PC if you're constantly hot-desking between offices, but don't neglect the issue of ergonomics: is your screen at the right height and does your chair offer sufficient lumbar support?



↑ Don't choose a desk or workstation on looks alone – space and flexibility are more important factors



The down side of these one-size-fits-all desks from the likes of PC World and Ikea is that they won't be ideal for everybody. For a truly tailored table a specialist supplier is the order of the day. Osmond Ergonomic Office Solutions trades in a wide range of adjustable furniture but, predictably, pricing reflects the versatility of the products. If you didn't think it was possible to spend £3,995 on a top-of-the-range office chair, think again.

The Osmond range starts at rather more accessible prices, though on the topic of penny-pinching the firm's founder is forthright in his condemnation: "It amazes me that people are prepared to spend two grand on a computer and yet baulk at the thought of paying even fifty quid for a chair or desk. You'll spend hours each day sat at the workstation, so invest wisely."

For a truly ergonomic small- or home-office setup, Osmond recommends the company's own Symbio chair range (prices from £320) in conjunction with a SiSsoho desk configuration, which will cost around £300 for a suitable arrangement. It's a lot of money, but you could be relying on this equipment for

years. Besides, it's not all bad news as the cost of all business-related gear can be written off against your tax liability.

Prints charming

Talking of startup costs you'll almost certainly need a printer and an image scanner. A fax machine will probably prove useful, too. Top of our Top 10 Colour inkjet

"It amazes me that people are prepared to spend two grand on a computer and yet baulk at paying even fifty quid for a chair or desk"

printers chart (page 250) is Epson's £79 Stylus C62. This is fine if you want to combine quality colour printing with reasonably nippy text output – around 7ppm (pages per minute) – but to churn out pages at speed consider Oki's £209 laser, the OkiPage 14ex.

Canon's CanoScan D1250U2 is currently our Best Buy scanner: this £75

model combines a 600dpi (dots per inch) scan resolution with amazing colour depth and zippy operation.

In the fax machine arena it's possible to pick up a practical model for precious little. BT, for instance, flogs the PaperJet 55 plain paper model for £119.99 inc VAT.

A money- and space-saving alternative can be found in an MFD (multifunction device). MFDs incorporate the functions of several machines in one unit. A typical example is Lexmark's X63, which combines colour printing, scanning and full fax facilities in a single, shoebox-sized case. As well as being cheaper than buying three devices – the X63 costs just £129 – an all-in-one unit like this will occupy but a third of the desk space. On the down side, if a fault develops and the device needs to be sent to the local repair shop, you'll lose the bulk of your electronic office equipment in one fell swoop.

Something else that can wipe out electronic equipment in a flash is a power cut. If the computer conks out while you're working, you could lose your precious data. To prevent this, buy a UPS (uninterruptible power supply) – a large rechargeable battery that can continue pumping juice to mains-reliant equipment. A basic model like Belkin's £111 Regulator Gold 625VA UPS has sufficient energy reserves to power a computer for up to 41 minutes in the event of a blackout.



Backup basics

Information is all in business and if the hard disk dies, taking with it vital files and documents, you might as well wave goodbye to your operation – unless you have backups of the data. A CD writer or rewriter provides an ideal way to make quick, cheap backups of important data. The drives themselves are almost standard issue on new PCs while blank discs are very cheap. Jungle.com is currently selling a spindle of 50 discs (each capable of storing 700MB of data) for under £10.

Having all your important data doubled up on CDs stored in an office filing cabinet will be a fat lot of use if the whole lot goes up in flames overnight.

Regularly duplicate the backup discs and store them at another location. If that sounds like too much hassle then consider using an offsite storage and backup system.

MyDocsOnline (www.mydocsonline.com) allows you to exploit a fast internet connection to drag and drop documents and files to a server thousands of miles away. You are charged 'rent' on the amount of hard disk space you need, with 1GB of storage costing \$349 (about £220) a year.



Out of the office

If you don't have room to create an effective workspace at home, consider renting some office and/or desk space. To keep things super-simple, opt for a ready-to-run office deal which includes provision of utilities and services like electricity, telephone, fax machine and an internet connection.

Alternatively, you can furnish an empty office to your exact requirements. A facility like Serviced Office Search (www.servicedofficesearch.com) automates the hunt for suitable spots: just tap in your postcode and then follow the links. Expect to pay anywhere between £300 and £1,000 a month, depending on the amount of space and level of services on offer.

And if it's looking like you can't afford to buy the programs you need to run your business, you can hire them instead. So-called ASPs (application service providers) help out small firms who have a need for bigger-business applications by renting usage of otherwise prohibitively expensive software tools.

Security and insurance

A one-man-band outfit is unlikely to require anything beyond cover for assets and equipment if property and building belong to a third-party and liabilities (such as employees) are non-existent. Make sure you call an insurance company

to discuss your specific needs. Similarly, talk to a specialist firm about security. Alarm systems can be rented or bought though maintenance will be an ongoing cost regardless.

For home-based businesses, things aren't so clear cut. Just because your business operation resides in a spare room, your household insurance policy won't necessarily cover all eventualities. If the insurance company catches wind of your business dealings and can fairly demonstrate that equipment subject to a claim had been used primarily for commercial purposes, it could well be within its rights to deny settlement.

On the other hand, if you own a PC that's used only occasionally for business purposes it's a reasonably safe

assumption that your home contents policy is adequate. The terms will guard against accidental damage to, or theft of, a computer – just as they would any other item in your home. But this is a grey area: if you have any doubts about the scope of your household policy, contact the insurer.

Connectivity and communications

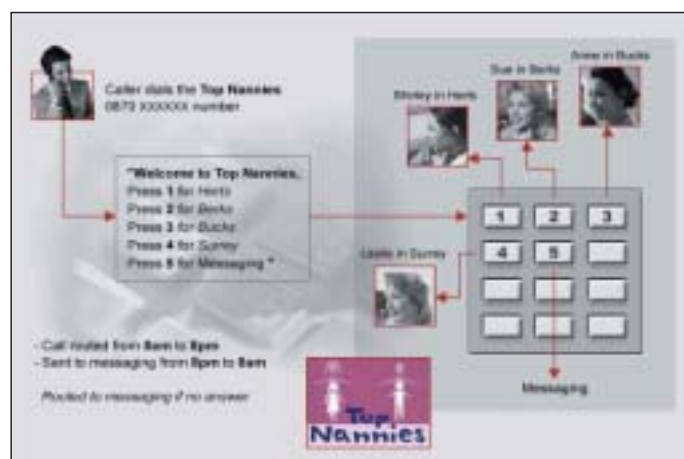
You've got office space lined up, along with a roomy desk and a comfy chair. The computer equipment is ready to roll and the whole lot is safe, secure and adequately insured. Time to open the doors for business? Not quite.

All businesses need to communicate and there are myriad ways of doing so. Mobile phone communications complement the traditional telephone landline, which in turn might provide a link to the wider world in the form of a dialup internet connection.

In business, though, it's a bad idea to rely on a lowly phone line for the gamut of communications. When trade picks up and transactions begin to escalate, the flow of emails, phone calls and faxes could soon cause a flood. Invariably, the telephone will ring when you need to connect to the web to send an urgent email or the incoming fax will be hogging the phoneline when you most need to make a call.

While modern communications technology spawned these contentions, it has also created a way of eradicating most of them: broadband. ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line) broadband technology uses the existing telephone network infrastructure to provide a super-fast, always-on connection to the

→ Larging it: give your small company a big firm look and feel with a communications solution from a call-management company



internet without clogging up the phoneline. It doesn't matter whether you're operating from home or from a dedicated business premise: broadband can transform an old-fashioned landline into a high-speed web connection while preserving all voicecall facilities.

At the moment this type of broadband is only available to a limited percentage of the population. If you live and work in a metropolitan area, it shouldn't be any bother obtaining an ADSL connection but those dwelling and toiling in the sticks are likely to be disappointed.

In order for ADSL technology to work, connections cannot be made further than about 5km from the telephone exchange. To check whether your place of work will be able to go the distance, visit BT's ADSL availability-checker service at www.btopenworld.com/broadband/availability. If you're out of luck cable companies such as Telewest and NTL provide similar broadband facilities over their respective networks. However, the

coverage offered by these firms is even more limited than ADSL availability.

Home-based businesses should be aware that all broadband services are subject to terms and conditions and those pertaining to domestic installations may expressly preclude use of the connection for certain commercial/business activities.

The terms of BTopenworld's £29.99-per-month Home 500 ADSL package, for instance, proscribes the sending of 'unsolicited advertising or promotional materials' using the service. Obviously, this clause is designed to discourage would-be spammers from firing off emails and that's only sensible. But businesses

have a legitimate need to market their services and, as such, it represents an undesirable restriction.

In other words, if you're signing up for broadband service for your business, you should consider how your operation will use the connection and whether you're likely to breach the terms of any 'fair use' policy. Most broadband providers divide their services into home and business offerings. Terms and conditions attached to the latter variety will likely be more flexible with regards to commercial use.



Real office applications. Real value.

StarOffice 6.0 software has full word-processing, spreadsheet, presentation, database and draw applications. You'll find it is cross-compatible with many other suites, has a standard, easy-to-learn interface and comes with full support from Sun. So in the end, you'll discover that StarOffice 6.0 software is more than inexpensive, it's also incredible value.

**StarOffice 6.0 is available at
the following outlets**



StarOffice™ 6.0 Office Suite
A Sun™ ONE Software Offering



Naturally, though, you can expect to pay more for a package pitched at traders.

Find-me phone numbers

One-man firms can benefit from a 'personal number' or call-management service. In essence, these provide a single point of contact for your customers and clients though they operate in different ways.

If you're out and about on business, a personal number will enable you to forward incoming calls to wherever you wish. In the office, for example, personal calls could be directed to the landline telephone on the desk in front of you, but when out and about incoming communications could be redirected to your mobile phone or other convenient telephone.

The advantage is that patrons in possession of your personal number don't need to know where you are or what you're up to: they'll be able to track you down wherever you may be. The down side of personal numbers is that, like the mobile phone numbers they resemble, it costs a pretty packet to call them. Customers won't take kindly to paying a premium to talk to you about business, particularly if they discover that the calls are being routed to a cheaper-to-dial landline number.

In contrast, a call-management service lets you put a big front on your small firm.

Depending on the kind of package you plump for, callers could be greeted by a living, breathing human being or an automated voice-menu system. You can have them dial a local or national rate number or even a freephone one. Best of all, this needn't cost a fortune to arrange: a firm like YAC (www.yac.com) has a range

Customers won't take kindly to paying a premium to talk to you, particularly if calls are routed to a cheaper-to-dial landline number

of versatile call-management services, all of which operate remotely. And there's no upfront outlay – simply tailor a service to suit your needs and YAC will run the whole shebang for you, invoicing either monthly or on a per-received-call basis.

As an example, if you wanted your customers to be able to contact you via

a freephone number, YAC will charge you 9p for each received-call minute; incoming calls are routed through to any standard UK landline (or mobile, if you're prepared to pay extra). On top of the call charges, it costs £100 to sign up for the service and there's a minimum monthly spend of £30.

The same company also maintains a personal number service. It costs nothing to obtain a number (which will be prefixed with the 07092 dialling code) and with it will come basic call-management services, such as the ability to set up a simple menu system. For its part, YAC makes money from callers to your business: personal numbers are billed at BT's 'K' rate, which translates to 37.5p per minute during peak periods, 25p off-peak and 12.5p at weekends.

Kit yourself out

Now you've read all our advice, it's time to go shopping. And where better to start than with the box below which lists all the products mentioned in this feature. ■



Shopping list: office kit

Desktop computers

- Arka Micro C1700E **0870 160 9700**; www.evesham.com; £549 ex VAT.
- Matrix XP 2000+ **0870 046 4747**; www.meshcomputers.com; £499 ex VAT.

Notebooks

- Multivision Visage **0870 220 2822**; www.multivision.co.uk; £979 ex VAT.
- Patriot 2431 **0845 601 4901**; www.pcworld.co.uk; £799 inc VAT.
- Q10 TLC 933 **0870 601 0309**; www.samsungelectronics.co.uk; £1,499 ex VAT.
- Sony Vaio C1 **020 7365 2947**; www.sonymstyle.co.uk; £1,619 ex VAT.

PDAs

- Sony Clie PEG-NR70V **020 7365 2947**; www.sonymstyle.co.uk; £382 ex VAT.

- Toshiba e740 **0870 444 8944**; www.toshiba.co.uk; from £425 ex VAT.
- Palm m05 **0207 365 9820**; www.palm.com/uk; £67 ex VAT.

Software

- Office XP Standard edition **0870 601 0100**; www.microsoft.com/uk; £429 inc VAT.
- Office XP Professional edition **0870 601 0100**; www.microsoft.com/uk; £519 inc VAT.
- StarOffice 6.0 **01252 421 590**; www.sun.co.uk; £52.99 inc VAT.

Furniture

- Robo Centre and Manhattan Deep Corner Desk **0870 600 2020**; www.argos.co.uk; £89.99 and £79.99 ex VAT respectively.
- Symbio chair **01202 850 550**; www.ergonomics.co.uk; from £320 ex VAT.

- SiSsoho desk **01202 850 550**; www.ergonomics.co.uk; from £214.99 ex VAT.

Printers, faxes & scanners

- Epson Stylus C62 **0800 220 546**; www.epson.co.uk; £79 inc VAT.
- Oki OkiPage 14ex **01753 819 819**; www.oki.co.uk; £209 ex VAT.
- BT PaperJet 55 **0800 800 152**; www.bt.com; £119.99 inc VAT.
- Lexmark X63 **08704 440 044**; www.lexmark.co.uk; £129 inc VAT.

Miscellaneous

- Regulator Gold 625VA UPS **00800 2235 5460**; www.belkin.co.uk; £129.99 inc VAT.
- BTopenworld Home 500 ADSL **0800 085 7054**; www.btopenworld.com; £29.99 inc VAT per month plus setup costs.