

Key Messages about IT Best Practice.

1. Develop and implement an overall IT strategy.

- Review your business's current and future information needs. Seek opportunities to reduce time spent answering queries or finding, collating, reconciling, correcting or analysing data. Could you benefit from more accurate, comprehensive or timely information?
- Audit your existing IT facilities, IT skills, IT management and outsourcing arrangements.
- Is the current split between outsourcing and in-house work correct?
- Conduct a cost benefit analysis of any improvement ideas.
- Develop a plan with a budget, deadline and person responsible for each deliverable.

2. Address security, reliability and similar issues.

- Address "House keeping" issues before problems strike. These include IT security, data back up, maintenance, compliance with licensing and data privacy legislation etc.
- Develop, communicate and enforce a written set of rules for all computer users.
- Consider a formal tech support contract with an external supplier combined with basic network administration training for one staff member.
- Identify tasks that need to be conducted regularly and assign responsibility for each.

3. Consider Independent Advice.

When making major IT related decisions, such as formulating a strategy or selecting software, consider paying for advice from an expert who is not trying to sell you something.

4. Address the People Issues.

- Consult those likely to be affected by an IT project or strategy to gain cooperation and information.
- eBusiness projects affect people outside the company. They should also be consulted.

5. Think Laterally about the Internet.

- Websites are not only about sales. Online sales do not suit some companies.
- The Internet can help your business in many different ways, such as: reducing order entry errors; providing 24 hour technical support; managing and supporting employees who are "on the road"; gathering information from customers etc.
- Think laterally and critically as the right approach varies greatly from business to business.

6. Make the most of what you have.

- Research suggests that most SMEs could make better use of their existing IT.
- Consider: additional training for those operating your accounts package or other business process software; exploring unused features; a minor upgrade; the addition of report writing software or changes in your way of working.
- The above steps could improve effectiveness and/or obviate the need for IT investment.

7. Beware Bespoke Software.

In the long run, packaged software often proves cheaper and safer than bespoke software.