

8 reasons your business needs a server



By [Monte Enbysk](#)

The words server and network used to conjure images of big computer rooms tucked inside the bowels of corporations, and managed by tech specialists in windowless offices. Thankfully, times have changed.

Today, server-based networks can be found in more than 20% of the U.S. small businesses with more than one PC, a percentage that continues to grow, analysts say. What's more, servers and networks have even moved into businesses with fewer than five PCs, as users see the efficiencies and better productivity of a shared network, analysts say.

And who are the people who manage these server networks? If you run your own business, it might very well be you. Or maybe it's your office manager, marketing specialist or finance officer "everyday businesspeople with enough tech smarts to run a successful business.

"I see more and more small businesses running servers, even one-person offices," says Laura DiDio, small-business analyst for The Yankee Group, a Boston-based tech research firm. "They allow you to get more bang for your technology buck."

A Look at Two Users

Below, I outline the reasons your small business needs a server (servers are computers that provide services, commands and centralized management to workstation computers, called "clients"). But first, see why these users have server-based networks in their offices.

DiDio herself is one such user. She works out of her suburban home part of the time, and needs to make the most of what she spends on technology. "I've got two laptop PCs at home, two separate broadband connections, three phone lines, and a server" powered by Microsoft Small Business Server, she says.

The server, she says, is what makes her system thrive. It allows DiDio to centralize and protect her PC data, monitor files, make backups easy, and work efficiently with customers "so much so that customers get the same strong service whether she's at her home office or her Boston company office.

"Having a server allows me to move more quickly, install whatever [applications] I need, and project a professional image," she says.

Harry Brelsford, a technology reseller and author in Bainbridge Island, Wash., is another believer. He runs three client PCs and a server from his office, where he consults to some 20 businesses on technology and also writes technology books (he's done 10 so far).

"Having a server and a network has brought me a lot of efficiencies," Brelsford says. "If I need a file, I know right where to go to get it. You also have a lot more confidence in the stability of your system, no matter what you put it through. You simply can do your job better " you won't be held back," he says, by inadequate storage, disorganized files, low processing power, or lost data.

Both DiDio and Brelsford say servers from Dell and HP that run U.S. \$1,000 and under, combined with Microsoft's new Windows Small Business Server 2003 software (\$599 for the Standard Edition), make for an attractive package for cost-conscious business managers. The Standard Edition also includes Microsoft Exchange Server 2003.

Ray Boggs, vice president of small-business and home-office research for IDC, the Framingham, Mass., tech research firm, agrees. He says that while all small businesses can benefit from the move to client/server technology, those with five to 15 or more PCs have the most to gain, due to the deals to be had and the new hardware and software catering to this market.

"Server prices are going down and the functionality keeps improving," Boggs says.

Eight Reasons You Need One

Based on these analysts' feedback and others', here are eight reasons to buy a server for your small business, rather than doing without or relying on peer-to-peer networking.

1. You can create order from chaos. By centralizing data on a server, you can better manage business-critical information. Sharing files and other data across PCs becomes much easier, as does migrating data from one PC to another. And as DiDio points out, older PCs can get new life if their files and data are off-loaded onto a server. "A lot of people are buying servers and opting not to dump their old PCs and laptops," she says.

2. You can protect your data by making backups easier. Two features of Windows Small Business Server 2003, for example, enable users to better protect their data assets by simplifying backups and the restoration of critical data. The features are the Backup Configuration Wizard and Volume Shadow Copy.

3. You can collaborate better as a business. Not only is data sharing easier with a server-based network, but Windows Small Business Server 2003 comes with Windows SharePoint Services, which is software that enables your employees and other team members to collaborate via the Web. With SharePoint, you get a company intranet portal with a user-friendly interface to organize and share information. It comes pre-populated with help documents and resources. A server also is a must if you want to run line-of-business applications, such as accounting solutions from Microsoft Business Solutions, on multiple PCs.

4. You can accommodate a mobile work force. Servers enable authorized out-of-office workers to have remote access to your network, enabling data sharing among those who travel, telecommute or work in off-site locations. Through Remote Web Workplace, users of Windows Small Business Server 2003 can get access to server data via the Internet. Out-of-office workers also can connect to the company intranet via SharePoint.

5. You can share high-speed broadband access. "A real catalyst to server sales among small businesses is in providing high-speed Internet access across a network," says IDC's Boggs. "If I'm running a business now that has three or more dial-up accounts, it's time to get a server and go broadband." The return on investment will come quickly in the form of higher productivity, he says.

6. You can set up new computers, add users and deploy new applications more quickly and easily. Expect to grow? By managing your data from a central location, you can better coordinate the addition of new PCs, software licenses and software applications. You can also better manage firewalls and monitor threats to your data, and more easily deploy virus protection and intrusion detection.

7. You can get more processing power. A server can supercharge your network, storing large chunks of data, freeing up memory and enabling individual PCs to perform better. Small business today need that additional processing power to run Web services, manage Web sites, do e-mail newsletters, and use more sophisticated tools and applications, DiDio says. (Boggs says he foresees more and more households buying servers to accommodate students using their PCs as educational labs and teenagers who buy online games and other sophisticated applications.)

8. You can look more professional - and connect better with your customers. Server software such as Windows Small Business Server 2003 enables you to consolidate your e-mail accounts (AOL, Yahoo!, Hotmail, etc.) into a single, company-hosted e-mail account, enhancing your image to customers and partners. "You could have several aliases from one root e-mail address," Brelsford says. "A server can make a lot of businesses look bigger than they are." Adds DiDio, "It not only gives you more bang for your buck; it makes you look more professional to those you want to do business with."

How you know it's time to buy a server

- You have two or more dial-up accounts in your business.
- You need to centralize and organize your data (you can't always find what you need when you need it).
- You need to share hardware such as printers and fax machines for two or more PCs (peer-to-peer networks mean lots of cords and wires to trip over).

- You need to simplify backups to keep your data more secure.
- You have employees who travel, frequently telecommute, or work off-site, and want to connect to a network.
- You could benefit from an intranet (your employees who travel and telecommute don't always remember to tell you).
- You have high storage needs (and your loaded-down PCs wince and groan when you add more data).
- You'd like to run accounting software or other line-of-business application on more than one PC.
- Your company's growing and plans to add new computers and employees (congrats!).
- You mean business: You want to look professional (and bigger than you are).
- Your PCs are old, old, old, and you want to get rid of them. A server makes migration easier.
- Your PCs are old, old, old, and you want to keep them. A server takes a load off the PCs.