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By Amanda C.
Kooser

NEW ATTITUDE: "Why would I expect people to move to Louisville when the work is everywhere?" says Kathleen Miller.



AROUND THE GLOBE: "It's better to get good talent than to worry about them sitting next to you," says Ephraim Cohen.

Behind every good work site is good technology. From home offices to hotel rooms, technology is the wind beneath your business wings, the premium gasoline in your work tank, the foundation of your building—you get the idea. Slews of laptops, wireless solutions, remote software and cell phones await your use. But with so many options, how do you choose which technologies will work best to keep your business running smoothly, even if your workers and offices are separated by many miles?

Often, you're advised to go talk to your peers with growing businesses who are dealing with similar issues. That's a great idea, so we talked to some for you. Ephraim Cohen, 34, is co-owner and partner of The Fortex Group (www.fortexgroup.com), a communications firm in New York City. His company has a strong focus on business in Southeast Asia, and the list of locations his employees work from sounds like something out of *National Geographic*. There is a full-time employee in India, a virtual office in Singapore, three people working part time out of home offices on the West Coast, and several New York City office workers who frequently work out of their homes. Cohen himself falls into this last category.

Fortunately, Cohen saw it coming when he co-founded The Fortex Group in 2003 and was able to plan the technology to handle the great distances between workers. "It's better to get good talent than to worry about them sitting next to you," he says. "There are a lot of great technology tools to make it easy to work as a team anywhere in the

world." A computer buff at home, Cohen was a natural choice to choose and set up the technology for The Fortex Group.

GETTING STARTED

It sounds basic, but the first step is to figure out what you need to do with your extended work force. Cohen figured that his business had two main requirements: Employees needed to talk with each other on a minute-by-minute basis, and they needed to have access to files away from the main office. Most growing businesses with multiple work sites will have those two needs right at the top of their lists. To add a challenge, these needs have to be met at a price point that won't strain the budget.

Here's how The Fortex Group handles it. There are no deep secrets or complex technology installations behind their solution. Basically, it's about e-mail, telephones and IM. For e-mail, they went with an outsourced solution from BlueTie (www.bluetie.com). They compared some less expensive options, but went for the extra features and high-end security that BlueTie

offers. "We don't ever want to have a problem with e-mail getting out because of low security," Cohen says. Outsourcing e-mail also makes it easy to set up new accounts through the web when needed.

The Fortex Group is taking advantage of some of the new telephone technologies to keep international calling bills down. They use Skype (www.skype.com), a low-cost internet telephony service that allows calls from computers to phones. "The cost of talking with our person in India is nothing," says Cohen. He says the quality is up to par with traditional phones, and his company has knocked hundreds of dollars off its monthly communications bill. This is an example of adapting a consumer-oriented service for business use with money-saving results. Such a solution may not be right for every globe-spanning business, but it's worth a look.

Keeping in touch by phone is a no-brainer, but for The Fortex Group, IM is just as valuable. "It solves the big problem: When someone is not in the office, how do you feel like they're next to you?" Cohen says. The entire business is on MSN Instant Messenger. Sometimes Cohen uses the program Trillian (www.ceruleanstudios.com) to communicate with clients over different IM platforms like AOL Instant Messenger and Yahoo!

The other pressing need was to have access to files while outside the main office. The Fortex Group decided to go with an in-house server. The company looked at a \$2,000 server with a lot of bells and whistles, but ultimately went for the cost savings of a Mirra server (www.mirra.com)

that came in at about \$300. That solved the issue of sharing, but, even better, it also solved the issue of backing up files. Free, secure web access and file sharing over the internet are part of the Mirra package.

ANOTHER TAKE

Kathleen D. Miller, 55, is the founder and owner of organizational performance consulting company Miller Consultants (www.millerconsultants.com) based in Louisville, Kentucky. The term *based* should be used loosely—Miller and her administrative assistant are located there, but the majority of the employees and long-term contractors work from other states, including Connecticut, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Texas. Miller also maintains a virtual office in Bonita Springs, Florida, to deal with the business's burgeoning Spanish-speaking market, as well as to go after the entrepreneurial market there. She's looking into opening a regular office there as well.

Miller Consultants started off in Miller's Lexington, Kentucky, home; moved to a traditional office building in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1995; and began to spread out geographically eight years ago. "We wanted to get the best employees and the best associates we could possibly find in terms of expertise," says Miller. One employee who had commuted into Louisville from Houston is now working from Tennessee. The change also made sense because the company's client base is located worldwide. "Why would I expect people to move to Louisville when the work is everywhere?" Miller says.

Miller credits top-notch technology with making the multiple sites work. Miller Consultants installed a Citrix (www.citrix.com) server to allow employees to log in from anywhere. "The Citrix server is the core of everything for us," Miller says. While The Fortex Group handles most of its needs in-house, Miller has been using the same IT consultants for 12 years. She leaves a lot of the research and recommendations up to them. Through the Miller Consultants website, they set up chat rooms and bulletin boards to keep the communications flowing. Employees can leave notes and keep conversations going through this private section of the website. They also occasionally use internet conferencing software like Microsoft's NetMeeting.

But when it really comes down to it, Miller Consultants gets a lot of use out of an old system: teleconferencing. The company had invested in a high-end videoconferencing system that matched the quality of those used by the large corporations it deals with, only to find that nobody really uses it. Now Miller has several teleconferences per week with different project groups while the participants work with files pulled from the Citrix server.

If some of the solutions The Fortex Group and Miller Consultants are using sound simple, it's because they are. With workers spread out geographically, training for complex applications can be more trouble than it's worth. Says Cohen of new technologies, "For them to be really effective, people have to get used to using them as second nature."

HOME OFFICES

A home office is a popular supplement to a regular office. Cohen, for example, often works for a few hours from home in the morning

VoIP Primer

VoIP is an increasingly popular tool that can help growing businesses save on their communications bills. For entrepreneurs dealing with multiple locations, it has some enticing features. Find me/follow me services can forward phone calls to wherever the user is. Employees located in home offices can be hooked up with in-office extensions, so dialing is the same as if you're calling somebody two doors down in the same building. For frequent travelers, IP softphones can get you up and calling normally from your hotel room.

Some companies may choose to go with an in-house IP PBX to converge their data and communications networks. In that case, it helps to have a trusty IT consultant to select and set up equipment. Others will look to service providers like AT&T (www.att.com) and Vonage (www.vonage.com). The basic Vonage small-business plan starts around \$40 per month, but that's the bottom end of the scale. Multiple work sites may call for more complex installations. Cost savings come in the form of long-distance savings, productivity-boosting call features and the ability to pull your various offices together as if they were under one roof.

If you're just getting started or are looking to upgrade your current phone system, VoIP is a tempting alternative that's worth a good, long look. Choose a provider based on call features, its experience with growing businesses, network quality and price. Check in with your in-house IT person or IT consultant about getting all your various offices onto the same VoIP page.

before heading to the office. Many entrepreneurs use their home offices to get work done at odd hours. Others, like Miller Consultants, have employees that work only from home offices.

There are some specific technology needs for home offices. Mike Wilson, president and CEO of IT consulting firm Connexia (www.connexia.com), has set up home offices, remote offices and multiple locations for many growing businesses. He's pleased with the advances in VoIP and has been using the technology for many of his clients. Among the advantages he cites are that home users can have an in-office extension, making it easy for co-workers and clients to get in touch.

As to be expected, security is always a big deal. "Home offices are having to become wiser to security," Wilson says. Besides the usual anti-virus requirement, he recommends installing a low-end firewall. He personally uses a Cisco PIX 501, which is an actual security appliance. A solution like that is fairly advanced for a home office and runs in the hundreds of dollars. It's also worth checking into popular firewall software like ZoneAlarm, available from Zone Labs (www.zonelabs.com). That particular application comes as part of a security suite for less than \$70 per year.

TRAVEL GUIDE

A secondary work site doesn't always have a permanent address. Today's entrepreneurs are more mobile than ever. Your work doesn't stop when you're on the road or catching an airplane. Technology is what keeps you in touch and keeps your productivity up when you're traveling. What's the number-one road technology? Wireless. That's a broad category that covers everything from your cell phone to the Wi-Fi card in your laptop.

We assume you have your cell phone all figured out, but we'll look a little closer at Wi-Fi. It's hard to find a business-class laptop that doesn't come with built-in Wi-Fi these days. Those with older machines can easily upgrade with an inexpensive Wi-Fi card. Both Cohen and Miller rely on their wireless laptops when they're traveling. Miller even admits to having run her business from a beach in Hawaii while on vacation. Cohen often finds himself logging on from hot spots in less exotic locales like Kinko's and Starbucks.

While hot spots abound across the nation, sometimes entrepreneurs find themselves high and dry with nowhere to get online. The most common problem is in airports. While many have hot spots, just as many don't. Cohen found a way to deal with it: He has a Bluetooth card in his laptop and a Bluetooth-equipped cell phone. Getting online through a phone means the speeds are comparable to dial-up, but it gets the job done. Says Cohen, "It has a nice convenience factor."

EXPERT ADVICE

Wilson has really seen it all. The technology he has installed for businesses with multiple work sites runs the spectrum of what's available. He has some tips for entrepreneurs who are looking for higher-end solutions to connect things like branch offices back to the main office. Depending on needs and budget, Connexia will set up either a private frame network or a public VPN over the internet. "Sometimes the internet choice is a lot more friendly on the budget," Wilson says.

When it comes to branch offices, Wilson recommends going with a low-end Windows 2003 server at each branch. Using distributed file systems, files can be automatically synchronized

with the server back at the main office. It's a low-hassle way to keep everybody up-to-date and working with the latest versions of documents and data. This method also works well across multiple offices. The cost can vary quite a bit with the chosen hardware and software, but expect to land in the \$5,000 to \$6,000 range.

No two businesses are the same when it comes to choosing and setting up technology to handle multiple work sites. But some advice applies to everybody. "Don't get carried away by bells and whistles," Cohen suggests. "Simple solutions are very often the best solutions. Figure out your baseline needs, and start there." You may, like Cohen, be comfortable testing and installing new technologies yourself. If not, do what Miller Consultants does and find a trusty IT consultant to handle the nuts and bolts.

There are solutions available for every challenge and every budget level. Whether it's just you on the road, a branch office or a whole slew of employees working from their own home offices, your technology will hold you together. Look for ways to boost collaboration and improve communication with your hardware and software choices. It will pay off in a healthy, modern business where traditional office walls are just remnants of the past.