



Ten Tips for Increasing Operational Efficiency

To remain competitive in an increasingly competitive world, businesses must boost operational efficiency wherever possible. "Sooner or later, any company not operating efficiently will be out of business," says Laurie McCabe, vice president of small and medium-sized business (SMB) insights and solutions for research firm AMI-Partners. It's particularly important for SMBs to operate efficiently, McCabe adds, because they often have more limited resources than larger enterprises.

The following are 10 tips for using network technology to help your business increase operational efficiency, reduce costs, improve customer satisfaction, and stay ahead of the competition.

1. **Provide employees with secure, consistent access to information.** One advantage of being an SMB is the ability to react more quickly than larger competitors. But if your company network is frequently down, sluggish, or unsecured, that competitive advantage is eroded. A secure, reliable, self-defending network based on intelligent routers and switches provides your business with maximum agility by providing reliable, secure access to business intelligence. What's more, a secure, reliable network infrastructure provides the necessary foundation for a number of efficiency-enhancing technologies and solutions, such as IP communications.
2. **Deliver anytime, anywhere access to mobile employees.** SMB employees are typically more mobile than those in larger enterprises, says Jan Dawson, research director of Ovum Research. "Ubiquitous access to people and information is particularly important for SMBs," in order to be productive while on the go, he adds. Technologies enabling ubiquitous access include virtual private networks (VPNs), which securely connect remote workers to the company network, and pervasive wireless networks, which enable workers to stay connected to the network while roaming about an office building or campus.
3. **Create effective business processes with partners.** Some large enterprises make efficient, secure business processes a prerequisite for doing business with them. To develop efficient business processes that meet the requirements of your partners, your business needs a secure, reliable network infrastructure.
4. **Make it easy to collaborate.** Effective, interactive collaboration between employees, partners, suppliers, and customers is a sure-fire way to boost efficiency while also reducing costs. Integrated voice, video, and data and wireless provides the kind of interactive calendaring, videoconferencing, IP communications, and other technologies your business needs to foster seamless, easy collaboration.
5. **Enable employees to take their phone systems wherever they go.** Missed calls create any number of business challenges, including operational inefficiencies (from trying to reach absent colleagues), project delays, missed opportunities and lost revenues. An IP communications solution enables your workforce to have one phone number that simultaneously rings on multiple devices, greatly increasing the chances of being reached on the first try. Workers can access their entire communications system wherever they go and can check e-mail, voice mail, fax and pages all in one inbox, among other benefits.
6. **Streamline communications with customers.** Interacting with customers efficiently and knowledgeably helps keep them satisfied—and few things are as important to your bottom line as satisfied customers. Linking an IP communications system to a customer relationship management (CRM) solution is one way to enhance customer communications. When a customer calls, a pop-up window of the customer contact record appears on an employee's IP phone screen, computer screen, or both. Before the second ring, the employee answering the call has access to information about the customer calling, such as orders pending and recent returns.

7. **Reduce unproductive travel time.** Any time spent traveling, particularly by airplane, can dramatically reduce operational efficiency. An IP communications solution that offers rich-media conferencing, such as videoconferencing, helps reduce the need to travel to offsite meetings and training sessions. The time saved from traveling can be better spent on more productive pursuits. Also, reducing travel saves money.
8. **Outsource IT tasks.** Is it the best use of an employee's time to manage your network security or IP communications system? Often, a more efficient option is to outsource such tasks to a managed service provider. A service provider has the expertise that your business needs but may lack, without the need to spend time or money developing that expertise in house.

Also, outsourcing enables your employees to stay focused on productive activities related to your business's core competencies. And that helps keep your business competitive.

Outsourcing tasks can help improve customer satisfaction and your competitiveness. "A lot of small businesses think it's cheaper to do everything themselves," says AMI-Partner's McCabe. "But employees can get overloaded, and they may not be in a good mood when interacting with your customers." McCabe adds that SMBs often don't do as good a job at an IT task, such as IP communications, as a managed service provider would do for them. "And if you're not doing a good job at something, your competition probably is," she adds.

9. **Improve employee retention and satisfaction.** When your business has inefficient processes, such as antiquated phone systems or a sluggish network, employees can get frustrated, because they can't get their jobs done with the tools provided. Customers may perceive that frustration and lose confidence in your business. Even worse, valued employees can become burned out and decide to move on. Not only have you lost a productive worker, you must spend time and money hiring a replacement. To help ensure employees are productive and satisfied, your business needs, at a minimum, a secure, reliable, always-available network.
10. **Develop a long-term technology plan.** Whenever you replace hardware that has become obsolete or ineffective, it's disruptive to workers—and that results in low productivity. You can minimize or eliminate such disruptions by carefully determining short- and long-term business objectives and the carefully mapping technology solutions to those objectives.

"Every year, you should try to determine how well your technology solutions map to your business objectives," McCabe advises. Ask your value-added reseller, network provider, or other trusted adviser for help, she says. "The companies who have a plan and keep it updated are most likely to streamline their operations—and outperform their competition."