

WITH TECHNOLOGY EVERYTHING HAS BECOME POSSIBLE

BY NICK HUGHES

The technology available to the small business owner is comparable to those available to large corporations. This is a remarkable fact, one that will allow small business owners to create and build sophisticated operations. To explore this further, I knew I would have to have a conversation with Leslie Babel, President of DigitalFire Inc, an IT Support and Technology company. Leslie's passion is technology and how he can apply it to make small business more effective, more competitive, and more fun!

I started our conversation by asking what technology will have the biggest impact on the operation of small businesses. Without hesitation he answered the explosion in quantity and quality of Open Source software. Open Source software is the result of designers and programmers around the world collaborating to build applications for the pure love of creating unique and/or complex computer systems. The most famous example is the competitor to the Windows operating system Linux.

Open Source software will have a huge impact on the way we operate our businesses because there are thousands of communities out there producing thousands of different applications all the time. As Leslie explained to me, there probably isn't a business process or application for which you cannot find a computer system solution. This means that we can computerize parts of our operation for low cost and with low risk that before would have required our own customized solution with the high costs and high risks that that entails. We can implement a system that is already working, that often has a price tag of zero and is up and running in days. We small business owners can now benefit from technologies that only the largest corporations could at one time afford. (To get a sense of how huge Open Source software is and the unbelievable range of applications available go to www.SourceForge.net.)

Another technology that Leslie sees as having an enormous impact on the small business owner is the capability of being "truly mobile in every sense of the word". By this, he means the ability to operate our businesses whether we are sitting at our desk, sunning by the pool, or sipping a glass of wine in France. This is more, much more, than just hauling a laptop around with us. It means that wherever we are we will have

access to our entire business applications and information.

Truly mobile might be as simple as USB sticks that can completely mirror our desktops so that when we walk into an Internet café and plug in the stick it is our computer that comes up on the screen. But more ideally, it will take the form of real-time connection with our business systems so that we have our computer with us at all times. He painted a picture of us no longer having downtime away from our computers; as he calls it, "downtime now becomes useful time". I did not share his enthusiasm for this concept!

Quickly steering the conversation away from this Brave New World of being constantly connected to my business (which I do love but) I asked if the Web would have an impact. "Huge" he answered. "Absolutely massive" he added with a chuckle. Look at what has already happened in the relatively early days of Web 2.0. Networking sites such as Facebook. Collaborative sites like Wikipedia. These are technologies available to us now. Just picture it. We can have a forum for our clients to share, collaborate, and learn from each other. Our very own online client community. Or we can implement a Wiki site to build the knowledge and expertise in our particular industry. Impact—fantastic!

At this point, my business partner Judi joined the conversation. Her particular interests lie in sales and marketing and she was quick to point out what is already happening in the Web world. We can now build inexpensive websites with sign up capabilities to build our contact databases; with shopping carts to sell our product; with content management to give us the ability to change the content of the website. Judi said: "The Web world will only get more powerful and more useful to the small business owner".

The last words go to Leslie. "Dream up the ideal thing you want to accomplish and you will probably find the software and/or the hardware is out there to do it. Everything has become possible." **E**

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