

business solutions

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Kansas Association of School Boards: Working together to enhance educational opportunities



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We can all learn something from Kansas Association of School Boards (KASB). This nonprofit education association works diligently to secure the best possible public educational opportunity for all children in Kansas. I think KASB offers a lesson to other organizations and businesses on how to use technology to improve cost efficiency and performance.

You'll find the **Business Spotlight on KASB** on pages 4 and 5 of this *Business Solutions* issue. KASB currently uses services including our SafetyNet Assist Office program and the Networks Plus Data Center. This strategy, compared to KASB's previous reliance on mostly in-house resources, has streamlined their operation, enhanced security, and more.

On page 3, we ask the question, **Does Your Business Have a Technology Plan?** Learn why this type of planning is important and how to get started. Keep reading on page 6 to learn **Cost-Cutting Strategies for Small Businesses**, and then review why **Password Policy is Critical to Security** on page 7.

To be successful in business, you have to keep learning and remain open to change. When it comes to the subject of information technology, remember that Networks Plus can be your teacher. Bring us your questions about data services, colocation, hardware and software, IT support, network engineering, managed services, business continuity, and security. We'll have custom-fit, proactive solutions for you.

Sincerely,

Brian Thomason

CEO

Blue Valley Network of Companies



Does Your Business Have a Technology Plan?

Think strategically about hardware, software, and technical support



A technology plan is a design for the future, preparing your company to meet its changing technology needs. Every company needs a technology plan, no matter its size or offerings, and whether or not it specializes in technology.

Benefits of a Technology Plan

With a technology plan, your company can proactively adapt to, and keep up with, technological advances, which is beneficial in a number of ways:

- You will set goals to align technology with the needs of your business as you grow. A technology plan is where you can record such goals and track their progress.
- Your business will have the right equipment to meet new customer demands.
- You'll be ahead of the technology curve, signaling to customers that you're progressive, making your services and products accessible in ways that best suit their lifestyle.
- You'll have a budget for purchasing new technology so these expenses will drive the growth of your business, rather than become a burden. You can plan for periodic replacement and update of your technology to help prevent "surprise" expenses.
- Your business will be more attractive to younger workers to whom up-to-date technology is not just an added bonus, but expected.
- You may save money. By planning ahead, you are focusing your expenditures only on what is necessary to achieve your goals and grow your business, as well as avoiding the risk of having technology that becomes obsolete or is not suited to your goals. Thinking ahead and investing in better equipment can also result in fewer problems and less time and money needed to deal with them.

How to Get Started

The first step in building a technology plan is to assess your company's current technology. Ask for feedback from both customers and employees to see what needs to be improved. Look for areas of your business that could use more technology to make the work more efficient. Also, look for places where you may have technology that you don't need (for example, printers in a paperless office).

Next, think about what you want to accomplish in your business and how technology can help. Set goals accordingly. Make sure to consider the feasibility of the goals, including how much time and money it will take to complete each one. Consider what technology might be needed if your company grows and how technology may change over time.

Finally, present your plan to your trusted technology advisors. Be prepared to invest a few hours to discuss your goals, brainstorm solutions, and refine your technology plan. A small investment to do so will more than pay for itself with clearly defined and achievable plan.

After you create the plan, it's time to start implementation. Don't forget to revisit and revise it each year.

For more information about how the Networks Plus staff of business consultants can help meet your technology needs, call 800-299-1704, or email us at sales@networksplus.com.



Serving Educational Leaders,
Inspiring Student Success

Kansas Association of School Boards

Strategic technology decisions enhance efficiency, flexibility, and security

Kansas Association of School Boards (KASB) is a nonprofit education association whose purpose is to secure the best possible public educational opportunity for all children in the State of Kansas. KASB's mission is "Service Educational Leaders, Inspiring Student Success," and the association works to provide a culture of collaboration and service, be a voice of public education, and improve student education outcomes.

About 30 full-time employees work in a wholly owned 40,000-square-foot office building in Topeka. KASB provides lobbying efforts, board training, publications, seminars, research, legal information, negotiations, and policy services for its members. These members come from governing boards for unified school districts, community colleges, area vocational-technical schools and cooperatives, interlocals, and regional service centers.

Outsourcing IT to Networks Plus

Networks Plus has served the needs of KASB for many years. Richard Lincoln, Business Consultant at Networks Plus, says, "Originally, KASB had an in-house IT person and used Networks Plus to help them with projects. When this IT employee left, KASB decided to go with Networks Plus for all of their needs. They use a combination of our SafetyNet Assist program that includes the Help Desk and ad hoc on-site services."

The decision to go from an in-house IT person at KASB to using the Networks Plus SafetyNet Assist program was prompted by cost efficiency. Randy Weseman, KASB Assistant Executive Director of Operations, explains, "Given the rising costs of in-house employees, it made sense to secure a 24/7 model of technical support. In short, we are leaner and more nimble as a result of using Networks Plus," explains Weseman.

Data Center Adds Security and Confidence

KASB also uses the Networks Plus Data Center. Lincoln notes, "KASB originally had seven servers on premise. We recently consolidated and relocated most of the servers to the Networks Plus Data Center. Now KASB only has one server on premise to handle their Active Directory in order to make sure their user experience is very good. They also have five virtual servers in our Data Center, which means most of their applications and data are hosted in

our cloud. This data is all backed up locally in our Data Center as well as in our partners' Data Centers on both coasts."

What led KASB to use the Network Plus Data Center? Weseman replies, "As an organization with growing data needs, KASB recognized the value of flexibility. Disaster recovery, bandwidth requirements, security, and the high cost of hardware all contributed to KASB making this move. By having our data stored at the Networks Plus Data Center, we've added an additional layer of security and confidence."

In addition to cost efficiency, Weseman cites another benefit of working with Networks Plus: "KASB receives expert and timely service from the Networks Plus staff. I know I can count on them."

Given the rising costs of in-house employees, it made sense to secure a 24/7 model of technical support. In short, we are leaner and more nimble as a result of using Networks Plus."

— RANDY WESEMAN, ASSISTANT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, KASB

Better Education, Better Life

Because KASB has outsourced most of its IT and data storage activities to Networks Plus, the organization is able to focus more resources on its mission to improve education in Kansas. As summarized on www.kasb.org, "Education is the most important factor in economic and social well-being as measured by income, employment, crime, and social services. To improve the economy and quality of life in our state and communities, Kansas students must be able to compete with the best-educated employees, innovators, and leaders in the world, knowing that other states and nations are also striving to improve."

While there's much work to be done, Kansas has a solid foundation for success. The website shares, "Our education outcomes — test scores, high school completion, college readiness and completion — have never been higher. However, we can't afford to let up. When we consider national and global competition, the answer is clearly that we must continue to improve."



6 BENEFITS OF THE NETWORKS PLUS DATA CENTER

Networks Plus' Data Center allows you secure 24/7/365 access to your important Data without purchasing expensive new equipment. Our cloud data services are hosted on the highest quality virtualization servers, and our state-of-the-art data storage facility boasts exceptional security, fire suppression, climate control, power redundancy, and the ability to withstand natural disasters.

Here's a list of the top benefits of the Networks Plus Data Center:

1. Virtual servers and applications can be spun up as needed, allowing growth that suits your company's needs.
2. You only pay for what you use.
3. You have access to the latest technology.
4. Uptime is guaranteed.
5. You have several business continuity and disaster recovery options.
6. The Networks Plus Data Center is staffed by highly skilled, local technicians who care about you and your business.

Call 800-299-1704 to find out how the Networks Plus Data Center can help your business increase efficiency and reduce costs.



Cost-Cutting Strategies for Small Businesses

Reading this article could really pay off in the long run

No matter what type of small business you have, you should be able to find at least a few ideas here to help you cut costs. Every dollar counts, so it's important to save wherever and whenever you can.

Go Paperless

You can lower storage costs, printing costs, and improve overall efficiency by running a paperless (or near paperless) office. Try to scan documents and keep electronic records as much as possible.

Go Green

The more energy efficient your space is, the lower utility costs you're going to have. For more information on greening your spaces, check out Energy Star, a program run by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Lease Equipment Rather Than Buy It

A lease allows you to avoid the big upfront costs you'd face when purchasing equipment. You not only conserve your company's cash but can also save money in repairs, upgrades, and maintenance since many lease agreements cover these expenses.

Ask for the Discount

The suppliers you work with may have quantity discounts. To find out, ask about discounts and what you need to do to earn them. You may be able to get anything from an interest-free loan in the form of vendor credit to a healthy discount for paying early.

Barter With Other Businesses

This is an old-school strategy, but it can definitely still be effective. If you need a good or service and have something of value to offer in return, this could be a money-saving route to take.

Stay on Top of Your Accounting

When money is tight, things like late fees on bills or a client who doesn't pay on time can be a significant problem. Make every effort to ensure your collections are on time and outstanding balances are minimized.

Don't Buy in Bulk

Small business owners often buy things like office supplies in bulk because the per-unit cost is lower. But you have to ask yourself, "Will we ever really use 1,000 pens?" Generally speaking, it's better to buy only what you need today and free up your cash flow for other things.

Another way to cut costs and improve efficiency can be to utilize cloud data storage. To learn more, call Networks Plus at 800-299-1704.

Password Policy is Critical to Security

Common employee lapses leave businesses vulnerable



Answer this question: Do any of the employees at your business write down or electronically record their computer passwords? This is the equivalent of leaving the key under the mat, and creates significant security risks for businesses. Hackers are a clever bunch and will stop at nothing to get into your network for its resources and data.

Common methods used by hackers are brute force, dictionary attacks, and social engineering. Brute force is the most time-consuming method, and involves a program that tries every combination of letters, numbers, and keyboard characters to guess your password. Dictionary attacks use custom dictionaries filled with words and names, as well as number and letter combinations such as "11111" and "abc123." Social engineering is the most effective tactic. It refers to the practice of soliciting a password directly from a user. For example, a hacker posing as someone from your company's internet service provider could call in and get an unsuspecting employee's password by "testing the service." If the hacker sounds authoritative and legitimate enough, your whole network could be compromised.

A comprehensive password policy is your first line of defense against these attacks. To be most valuable, such a policy should include these elements:

Education of Employees

Employees don't always realize the importance of creating and safeguarding passwords. Instruct your users to never write down passwords and leave them in work areas, and to be particularly careful when entering passwords while strangers are nearby.

Creation of Strong Passwords

Mandate that passwords require certain combinations of letters, numbers, non-alphanumeric characters, and case sensitivity. Your policy could also dictate that passwords may not contain personal data (address or date of birth), dictionary terms, organizational terms, and user-related words (name or username). Remember that each character added to a password increases the protection. It should be 8 or more characters in length; 14 characters or longer is ideal. When a new password is created, find out how strong it is by visiting: www.microsoft.com/protect/yourself/password/checker.mspx

Regular Changing of Passwords

Get all operating systems, client-server applications, and other resources set to make users change their passwords on a periodic basis such as every 30 to 90 days.

Response to Invalid Login Attempts

Using operating system software, specify the number of times an account can attempt to authenticate before being locked out.

Enforcement Through Software

It's not enough to simply create a policy and expect users to stick to it consistently. Password requirements need to be enforced by the software that employees utilize throughout a network.

Safe Storage

Plan for the unexpected, such as a sudden or unplanned transition within your network administration staff. Consider keeping a copy of all critical passwords in your company's safe.

Visit networksplus.com/services/security to learn about the multiple security solutions we offer.



Virtual PBX

Move Your Business Into the Future

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Providing a professional experience when your customers call is critical — it can mean the difference between winning or losing business. So regardless of the size of your company, you should have access to the same features and functions as other cutting-edge organizations.

With Virtual PBX, Networks Plus delivers a best-in-class phone system with all the bells and whistles of a big company phone system, all at an incredibly attractive price. Count on Networks Plus to help move your business into the future.



- » Reduced Total Cost of Ownership versus premises-based systems
- » Popular features such as simultaneous ring, auto attendant, hunt groups, and music-on-hold
- » Mobility Package enables you to integrate your iPhone or Android devices
- » Web interface enables you to change features at the click of a mouse
- » Network-based service means Virtual PBX offers superior business continuity benefits
- » Desktop soft phone provides a full unified communications experience