

Where to find tech help

Services, Web sites offer free IT advice to small businesses

By RAYMUND FLANDEZ

Most small-business owners can't afford consultants or an information-technology staff. For tech support, they draw on other resources: neighbors, friends, relatives—anyone they know who might have a handle on a tech issue they don't understand.

But there are other sources that small businesses can turn to for reliable, inexpensive and even free tech support.

Arvind Malhotra, associate professor at the University of North Carolina Kenan-Flagler Business School, says he typically directs entrepreneurs to three starting points online. The first is baselinemag.com, the Web site of Baseline Magazine, a publication of New York-based Ziff Davis Media Inc.

The site focuses on how companies use information technology through news analysis and case studies and features tutorials and tools, including calculators that can help a business figure out the return on investment of tech projects.

Prof. Malhotra's second pick: CIO.com, the online arm of CIO magazine, published by International Data Group's CXO Media Inc. of Framingham, Massachusetts. This site is geared toward chief information officers, but it's chock-full of information on new technologies, the professor says.

Next comes Informationweek.com,

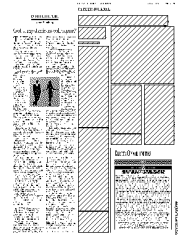
the Web site of Information-Week magazine published by **CMP Technology**, Manhasset, New York. Informationweek.com is rich with information that can give a broad overview of what's happening in the IT world, says Prof. Malhotra, who teaches classes on information technology and business innovation.

Last year, CMP also launched smallbizresource.com, a free technology-information resource for small businesses. It has articles about what computers to buy, what software is best for certain tasks, and evaluations of new technologies.

The site, which has generated almost two million page views so far this year, says it also provides tutorials on a range of topics, including setting up a wireless network.

"We're targeting people who work at home, at a home office or who don't have a dedicated IT staff," says Cora Nucci, editor of smallbizresource.com. While most of the information comes from the site's writers, there are links to other sites.

Recently launched [Biz Tech-Connect](http://Biz Tech-Connect.com) (biztechconnect.com) offers free online tech training and information geared toward women and minority entrepreneurs. Biz Tech-Connect was founded through a partnership of **Microsoft Corp.**, **Cisco Systems Inc.** and **AT&T Inc.**, and is managed by the Information Technology Association of America, Arlington, Virginia.



Small businesses also can find free tools online from big companies like **International Business Machines Corp.**, which encourages entrepreneurs to test emerging technologies from its labs. At ibm.com/alphaworks, for example, users can find a Web application called IBM Development Engagement Service, or DevEngage. This is a tool, found at services.alphaworks.ibm.com/devengage, with a simple user interface, largely using click and drag functions, that helps streamline daily tasks.

IBM handles the hosting of the application, which becomes accessible to a company after it registers on the alphaworks Web site.

Sometimes students can be teachers, too. This spring, the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis launched a cyber-security consulting program to help local entrepreneurs review and draft tech-security plans. The university teamed up some 30 graduate and undergraduate business students pursuing accounting and information-systems degrees with nine small companies in the area.

One beneficiary was **Indianapo-**

lis Appraisal Associates Inc., a real-estate appraisal company. The firm and its subcontractors, who sometimes work in remote locations, often exchange sensitive financial information electronically. Brett Martin, president of the appraisal company, says the students helped him devise a policy for ensuring that such communications were secure. They also helped make sure his Web site, www.appraisers.in, was in compliance with financial-privacy laws.

"I'm pretty computer-savvy, but I don't have time to dig into the details," says the 32-year-old Mr. Martin. "What's hard for a small-business guy like me is that it takes so many hours to read what you do for one thing. It's incredibly hard to keep up with."

Two students worked with Mr. Martin during the semester. They told him that he had an unsecured fax line that could present a liability unless a person in the office was trained to handle nonpublic information. They also suggested that files sent electronically be encrypted, and helped write a privacy policy for the Web site that tells consumers their personal information will not be shared with others.

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