

## MANAGING TECHNOLOGY

# Where to Find Good, Cheap Tech Help

*Friends and neighbors aren't the only option. Small businesses can turn to Web sites, government services—even a business school—for free IT advice.*

By **Raymund Flandez**

**M**OST SMALL-business owners can't afford consultants or an IT 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.

We interviewed technology experts about where to find the best help. We also asked small-business owners where they go to find the latest and most comprehensive tech information. In the process, we discovered not only what some consider to be the most helpful Web sites on tech matters for small businesses, but also government services that offer free consultations, and a business school whose students give free support to local companies facing network-security issues.

In other words, a lot of free help is available. Here's how to find some.

cally directs entrepreneurs to three starting points online. The first is [baselinemag.com](http://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](http://CIO.com), the online arm of CIO magazine, published by **International Data Group's** CXO Media Inc. of Framing-

ham, Mass. 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](http://InformationWeek.com), the Web site of **InformationWeek** magazine published by **CMP Technology**, Manhasset, N.Y. [InformationWeek.com](http://InformationWeek.com) is rich with news and other 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](http://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](http://smallbizresource.com). While most of the information comes from the site's writers, there are links to other Web sites, too.

Recently launched **Biz Tech-Connect** ([biztechconnect.com](http://biztechconnect.com)) offers free online tech training and information geared toward women and minority entrepreneurs.

Faye Lone, founder of **Faye Lone Creative Native Designs**, based in Alexandria, Va., says she logs on to the site at night after her kids go to bed. Lately, she has been reading about financial-management software for her own Web site, [fayelone.com](http://fayelone.com), where she sells high-end

Native American art and her interior-design skills. **Biz Tech-Connect** flags and reviews products Ms. Lone has found useful. Tutorials there have helped her learn how to design a more professional-looking and business-oriented Web site.

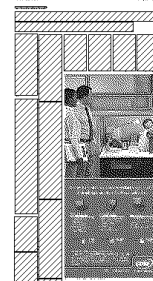
**Biz Tech-Connect** was founded through a partnership of **Microsoft Corp.**, **Cisco Systems Inc.** and **AT&T Inc.**, and is managed by the Information Technology Association of America, Arlington, Va.

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](http://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](http://services.alphaworks.ibm.com/devengage), with a simple user interface, largely using click and drag functions, that helps streamline daily tasks.

For instance, say your business orders lunch frequently from a local restaurant. You can build a Web-accessible online form where employees fill in their orders. The application tracks weekly or monthly costs, and helps the restaurant prepare the right orders in good time.

**IBM** handles the hosting of the application, which becomes accessible to a company after it registers on the [alphaworks](http://alphaworks.com) Web site.

"We are targeting business users with no technical skills," says Cynthia Peranandam, emerging-technology strategist for **alphaWorks**. The group uses feedback from users to potentially build a marketable **IBM** product.



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## GOVERNMENT

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Another easy way to get tech help is from the federal government. In every state, current and prospective business owners can get management and technology support from Small Business Development Centers, which are partly funded by the Small Business Administration in Washington.

The Northern California Network of Small Business Development Centers, whose region covers the San Francisco Bay area, was a big help in the fall of 2005, when **WeDriveU Inc.**, a San Mateo, Calif., chauffeur service, was looking to standardize the processing of driver assignments, invoicing and other e-commerce processes on a single online platform across its offices in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York, as well as new locations this year.

For six months, Dennis Carlson, president and CEO of WeDriveU, worked with a Northern California SBDC consultant, who assessed the company's current systems and made recommendations. The SBDC then helped Mr. Carlson select a software provider and ensured its proper implementation. Everything the SBDC did was free.

"Because of them," Mr. Carlson says, "I had the confidence to buy the system," which cost \$75,000.

"We know that business own-

ers don't want to become tech experts," says Kristin Johnson, region director of the Northern California Small Business Development Center. "We want to make sure that the technology decisions they're making are financially sound."

The program works with 300 clients each year for as many as 40 unpaid hours per client on issues such as Web site security audits, financial management and technology purchasing decisions.

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## ACADEMICS

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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, ranging from a two-person tax service to a midsize property-management firm.

One beneficiary was **Indianapolis Appraisal Associates Inc.**, a real-estate appraisal company. The firm and its subcontractors, who sometimes work in remote locations, often exchange sensitive financial in-

formation 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](http://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 non-public 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.

"It was a good way to provide a student with a project and offer assistance to the community," says Eric N. Johnson, associate professor of accounting at the Kelley School of Business. Prof. Johnson, who also teaches the class in IT security assurance, says he plans to offer the program again next year. ■■■

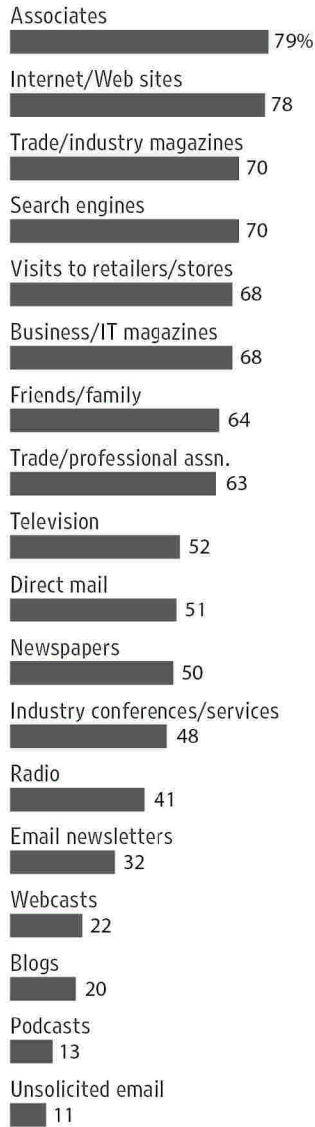


**ONLINE**

Arvind Malhotra, associate professor at the University of North Carolina Kenan-Flagler Business School, says he typi-

**Getting IT Info**

The percentage of surveyed small businesses saying the following sources have a strong or moderate impact on their awareness about IT, Internet and telecom-related products



Note: Survey covered businesses with at least one PC and fewer than 100 employees.  
Source: AMI-Partners