



When to switch on to a better business connection

Chris Stening, MD Easynet Connect on why small businesses should expect more from their business broadband.

The lessons we learn at home can often reap rewards when we take them into the office and vice versa. In our social lives we learn valuable interpersonal and relationship skills that can be invaluable when working with clients, whilst we learn budgeting, project management and negotiation skills at work that help us with various home projects. It always astounds me however, just how often we accept poor products and levels of service in our business lives which we wouldn't accept at home.

Take for example your home broadband and how you deal with your providers. Over the last 18 months we've been changing Internet, phone and mobile providers in our droves. Be it down to unreliable service, rude call centres or not being on the right package, we always know when we've had enough of one provider. When it comes to our business broadband for some reason, these instincts and standards abandon us. We recently researched UK SMEs and found that even though 77% had been let down by regular service outages and 29% experienced unacceptable connection speeds, only one in ten were prepared to switch provider.

This begs the question: why aren't small businesses more active in switching providers and seeking out better services when the business case for getting better broadband is growing by the day?

To demonstrate this point, 71% of SMEs couldn't cope for longer than a day without the Internet, over a third rely on their IP connection for disaster recovery and an equal number rely on the Internet as a sales platform¹. On top of this, the growing use of SaaS² and the rise in high-bandwidth applications such as online video and streaming are making ever-greater demands on company bandwidth. Put simply, if you ignore your Internet connection, you could be setting yourself for a costly fall. Could it be that many businesses lack a full understand of the technical aspects of an Internet connection?

Back to basics – one size does not fit all

Getting the right connection certainly requires having knowledge of the reliance you have on it as a business. Too many businesses invest in broadband without ensuring that it fully fits their needs, or blindly sign up to packages that vastly outstrip their real-life requirements. It sounds simple, but listing out all of the applications which depend on your IP connection and those you can't function fully without will give you a quick set of requirements your connection needs to meet. If any of these services are being frequently lost, then it could well be time to review your connection.

¹ Research carried out by QuoCirca on behalf of Easynet Connect

² SaaS: model of software deployment where an application is hosted as a service provided to customers across the Internet.

Glossary of Terms

VoIP: Voice over IP—using the internet and data networks to carry telephone calls

ISP: Internet service provider—company providing a connection to the internet

Contention ratio: the number of customers sharing a connection, and available bandwidth

DSL: digital subscriber line—an internet link over a conventional telephone line

ADSL: A = asynchronous, with faster download than upload speeds

SDSL: S = symmetric, with same download and upload speeds

The next step is to examine how your main applications use data - do they rely on downloading or uploading, do they use a constant amount of bandwidth, or create peaks and troughs throughout the day? Consider these alongside the other uses of your connection, when they are most called upon, and how important they are. For example, ambient web browsing doesn't require much bandwidth, but sending and receiving large files, running an online backup system and accessing online video will require a high quality connection for them to work well.

Many businesses find themselves with packages which don't grow and expand at the same rate as their business. For instance, if you are planning on recruiting significantly, investing in more SaaS services, or will be taking on projects which require you to send and receive large files, then make sure your ISP understands these requirements and your package is arranged so that getting access to greater bandwidth doesn't punish you financially.

Cut through the digital noise

Internet connection packages can be seemingly complex but finding the right one can pay dividends. Too many businesses select their ISP on the basis of connection speeds and bandwidth but fail to pay attention to issues such as contention ratios and connection quality which make up the overall picture of how good your broadband connection really is.

Understanding the Internet's technical jargon could help you avoid paying for the wrong type of product, which could be costly in the long run. Take the fact that 62% of SMEs didn't know what SDSL means or that 67% are unaware of what contention ratios are. Research the differences between DSL, ADSL, SDSL, leased line and Ethernet2 connections and make sure you are investing in a service which truly meets your needs by reading a jargon buster such as the one found at www.onlineconnectit.co.uk

Take contention ratios - one of the most important parts of your package, but which are frequently ignored or misunderstood. If your line has zero contention, it means that you have sole use and access to a direct connection between your business and local exchange giving a better service. If however, you have a higher contention ratio such as 50:1 it means that you will be sharing that capacity with 50 other users, often leading to slower connection speeds at times when others are using the same line. The risk is that if crucial apps depend on the headline bandwidth figure, but in reality you cannot access this because your line is contended, then it is certainly time to look elsewhere as your connection will simply not support your business properly. It is often better to go for a slightly 'slower' un-contended connection than a small share of a 'faster' line.

Expect more

In my mind, SMEs should expect more from their ISP, not just for a reliable technology, but also from value-added services and ongoing support and consultancy. If your connection is lost, the ISP should do more than just provide a back-up line, but it should let you know when connections are dropped in good time and have polite and informed support staff, ensuring your calls and queries are resolved quickly. You should demand 24-hour phone and technical support as part of your contract. Running a small company is rarely a nine-to-five pursuit and you need support round the clock to reflect this. Just think, if you were passed around a remote call centre for twenty minutes at a time when dealing with your home connection, you

would switch at the first opportunity. But when that time spent waiting is costing your business money, surely a change there should also go without asking?

Set Up and running

One of the most common barriers to changing ISP is the perceived hassle of getting set up with a new connection. I, like most managers, weigh-up the hassle and disruption of switching any service against the long-term benefits to be had from the new connection. With improvements in technology and delivery however, a completely new IP connection can be installed in as little as 30 days of signing a contract and your incoming provider should take responsibility for minimising any time spent without an active connection.

Case closed

There is no hiding from the Internet and companies of all sizes can gain from taking a second look at their Internet connection and switching provider. It is plain to see that too many SMEs are being let down by their provider and business owners need to demand more from their ISP. It is often a case of considering what you would do if you received the service you get at the office in your own home, and the answer is nearly always that a change is due.