

Preface

My grandfather never sat down in front of a computer. He never sent an e-mail, surfed the Web, or, to the best of my recollection, played a video game—even when, as a kid, I’d thrust an Atari 2600 joystick in his hands. Yet his imprint is all over this book.

Pop was an extremely smart guy who worked with his hands his entire life, beginning as a Pennsylvania coal miner in the 1930s and ending his career as director of the physical plant at a private school. He retired in 1976. He knew tools, and always picked the right tool for the job. He was innovative and flexible in his work, and rarely either hesitated too much before tackling a task or rushed into it. “Sit and think a minute,” he used to tell me. “Then get what you need and do it right. Work smarter, not harder.”

He loved that phrase. I like it too, especially in the context of technology—mostly because so many people aren’t doing it.

This book is called *Practical Tech for Your Business* for a reason. Practical technology is only a tool—nothing more. Practical technology helps you do your job faster, better, and easier. It doesn’t break the bank, it doesn’t monopolize your time, and it definitely doesn’t create more stress in your work life. Who needs more stress?

When Pop sat and thought about the task at hand, he was drawing on his experience and knowledge of tools, and applying both to the requirements of the task. Applying the lessons of experience and your knowledge of tools is easy. Gaining the experience and mastering the tools are harder. You may have had very little experience working with technology. You’re an accountant, a landscaper, a restaurateur, an architect, a retailer, or a consultant, not an information technology specialist.

That's where *Practical Tech for Your Business* comes in. Contrary to what other books may tell you, you're neither an Idiot nor a Dummy. It takes more than the brain of a chimpanzee to start a business, after all, so you've obviously got some smarts—you just need information. You may not have had much experience with technology, but many other business owners have, and I've interviewed a great many of them and recorded their experiences and their hard-won lessons. You probably don't know what a variety of tools are out there for you to use, or even where to look. These subjects are covered here, too.

Your Technological Evolution

This book is laid out more or less in chronological order, starting in your home office, where most businesses take flight. Chapter 1 discusses the basics of getting your first computer, loading it with the business software you need, and getting hooked up to the Internet—everything you'll need to start your business off on the right foot.

Chapter 2 takes you to the World Wide Web, where you can quickly and inexpensively promote your business. We discuss how to obtain a Web address, create Web pages, and find a home for your Web site. If you get nothing else from this book, I hope that at least you stake your claim on the Web—establishing a Web address is too easy and too effective not to.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss expanding your business from your home and into an office—or into a retail or manufacturing environment, depending on what your business is all about. Chapter 3 talks about the computers and hardware you'll need, while Chapter 4 introduces you to powerful software tools that can make it easy to expand your business, create new sales, and improve efficiency.

Chapter 5 returns to the World Wide Web to discuss electronic commerce, cautiously. After all, a lot of

people have lost a lot of money trying to bring their bricks-and-mortar businesses to the Web. We've learned from their mistakes, however, and you can, too.

Chapter 6 is all about mobility—the ability to use mobile technologies to make life on the road easier, from cell phones and pagers to laptops and handhelds.

Finally, Chapters 7 and 8 look at ways to use your technologies to best advantage. Chapter 7 deals with business intelligence, using your computers and all the data your business generates to find out more about your customers, your spending, your inventory, and your workers. Chapter 8 tackles the biggest question of all: How does a business improve its technology without breaking the bank as the business grows from point A to point B. We discuss managing your growth, your spending, and your technology as your equipment ages and new products are introduced.

Throughout this book, you'll find boxes with more information to help you make sense of it all. We define “Tech Terms” to help you translate techie-talk into plain English, and we provide a number of resources on the World Wide Web for you to explore further.

All in all, the idea here is to make this book part of your “sit down and think” stage. I'm not going to tell you what to do—I don't think you'd really appreciate that. Instead, I'm giving you the information you need to make informed decisions about using these amazing tools in your business. You may decide to use all of them, or only a few, but at least you'll know what technology is available and understand how it might help you.

It is all about finding the right tool for the job, after all. Enjoy and use this book, and remember: Work smarter, not harder.

Acknowledgments

For a writer, there's nothing quite like seeing your book first offered for sale. This being the Internet age, I saw it for sale before I had finished the final draft, thanks to pre-sales on Amazon.com. Talk about an incentive to finish on deadline! But the feeling was a thrill, and it

made me reflect on the people who helped make this book possible.

My first thank-you goes to Pat Esswein, probably one of the most patient and good-natured editors I've ever worked with in my writing career. Every time I got overly techie or made too many assumptions, her gentle questions and good humor reeled me back to reality.

Thanks also to David Harrison, director of Kiplinger Books, who helped transform a rough idea into a feasible project, and whose enthusiasm was contagious.

Cindy Greene provided editorial assistance; Priscilla Taylor copyedited the text; Allison Leopold proofread the final pages; and Heather Waugh designed the interior and exterior of the book. I offer my thanks to them.

Dozens of business people and entrepreneurs around the country opened their doors and computer files to me as I researched my subject, and their experiences and lessons are reflected in this book. Some of them appear in the pages ahead, but whether or not they're specifically mentioned here, their contributions have been invaluable.

I'm also grateful to the editors of *Kiplinger's Personal Finance* magazine and Kiplinger.com for their support during the writing of this book, as well as their continuing help in bringing excellent technology coverage to the magazine's readers. I particularly wish to thank Bob Frick, senior editor of the magazine and my boss, for his patience and counsel, and for his friendship. I'd also like to acknowledge Kim Lankford and Kevin McCormally, colleagues at Kiplinger, who contributed to the coverage of insurance and taxes in Chapter 1.

Nobody can function without friends, and I've been blessed with the best. For all their professional and personal support, Karl Isselhardt, Drew Montgomery, Nancy Trott, and many others have earned my gratitude.

Family, too, is a very important support when one is tackling a book like this. My mother has always encouraged me and given me great love, for which I am grateful.

And my wife, Kate, has given so much to me over the last five years that I cannot begin to thank her. This book is dedicated to her.