

Get a grip – on your data

For even the smallest companies, knowing how to manage data is vital to success

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SPECIAL TO FINANCE AND COMMERCE

Paul Clifford has seen his fair share of blank stares.

That's not to insult any of his clients, but the founder of St. Paul-based Davenport Group recognizes and appreciates that when it comes to data management, storage and recovery, most small (and even mid and large) business owners know little more than they absolutely have to.

"In today's business world, data is everything," he said. "But having data is one thing; having control [over that data] is something else."

And actually understanding data management is something else altogether. With expanding technology, a steady rise in and risk associated with data and the growing dependency on data-management systems, Davenport and several other local Twin Cities firms find themselves with more clients than ever – and the clients have more questions than before.

"Data management is not easy to get a handle on," said Bill Tomczyk, director of computer support for the state of Minnesota's Office of Enterprise Technology. "It's fast-moving and, of course, very technical. It requires working with a company that can not only help you get your data back should you lose it, but also store and manage what you have more effectively." According to IDC, a Framingham, Mass.-based market research firm, storage capacity is growing at a rate of almost 60 percent a year, nationally.

Though there were no statistics on capacity growth for the Twin Cities area, local officials said they have seen a steady rise.

"More and more small companies are realizing the importance and the need to have an effective data-management system," Clifford said. "And they're beginning to become more involved and educated about the process. Data management goes beyond simply recovering files from a big, expensive file cabinet."

For Davenport, the first and most important step is to simplify and streamline a company's data-management system. Because new technology develops so rapidly, many companies find themselves dealing with a variety of systems that perform separate data tasks. The idea is to "not the feed the monster, but reduce it."

Davenport, as well as many other local tech firms, uses the highly respected Compellent Storage Area Network (SAN), which is known for its flexibility and user control. Business owners are given an organized system for data management, which is kept onsite and easy to identify, control and, of course, recover.

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"Let me just tell you, that losing your data can set your company back for years," said the owner of a Minneapolis-based printing firm who asked to remain anonymous. Five years ago, the company found itself with faulty technology, and a human error essentially erased all its data. While most of it eventually was recovered, the process took time and money, putting the firm at risk of shutting down. "Losing your data is too big of a risk. I would suggest that any small business owner work closely with their data-management firm to understand where everything is and how everything works."

And many data firms are doing just that. At Davenport, the company first has an in-depth talk with their client to learn about any special needs and requirements, so they can customize the service and keep them informed on the systems. Then, as they install the SAN, they show the client what they're doing, educate them on the product and process and show them how they can manage themselves. The aim is to minimize the intrusion as much as possible, to always be available as a consultant but to cut down on the client's dependency on the data-management firm. The idea is that the more the client knows and understands, the more effective the data management will be.

"I can't tell you how important it was to have someone walk us through the process," said Dave Sunnicht, manager of information systems with Minneapolis-based Haworth Marketing & Media Co. As the company has grown from two servers 20 years ago to more than 30 servers now, officials knew they needed help. "We're a small business. And we can't dedicate one person to this. We need the support and we need to know what we have so we can help with any problems that arise."

Being educated also cuts down on the cost. Clifford said that the price for data management varies with each client and their individual needs. He said Davenport's price has ranged from \$28,000 to upwards of \$1 million. The more streamlined and prepared the client is, the more efficient the process will be.

"Data is always at risk and it's so important for the health of any business," he said. "You need to be in control of your data. And there are ways to help you gain that control and do it efficiently for you and your small business."

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