

protecting your most important assets – intellectual property rights

When you think about protecting company assets, several things probably come straight to mind, such as land, buildings, machinery, inventory and vehicles. In many instances companies overlook their intellectual property, which can be one of their most valuable assets. By understanding the different types of intellectual property and how they can be protected against infringement you can help your business stay ahead of the competition.

Your 'intellectual property' can include:

- patents
- trade marks
- designs
- copyright
- trade secrets

A patent is an exclusive right for commercial exploitation granted by a government body to the owner/inventor for a device, process, method or substance that is new, innovative and useful. The length of time for which the patent is granted varies between countries,

but typically lasts for 20 years. If you are thinking about patenting an invention, it's important to not make knowledge of it public before your patent is granted. Discussion with employees, consultants and business associates about the patent should be conducted confidentially, with confidentiality agreements signed in advance. The main shortcoming of patent protection is the complex and costly process of preparing and filing one. Professional assistance from a patent attorney is recommended.

Trademarks cover a range of elements (letters, numbers, words, phrases, smells, shapes, logos, pictures, aspects of packaging, or combinations of these) that distinguish your goods and services. They can be a vital part of your marketing and require protection. Trademarks need to be unique or closely associated with your business. For example, Coca Cola is trademarked as an original name. Windows is a trademark of Microsoft, as it is the name of its computer operating systems, while anyone can use the word 'windows' to describe the glass used in buildings.

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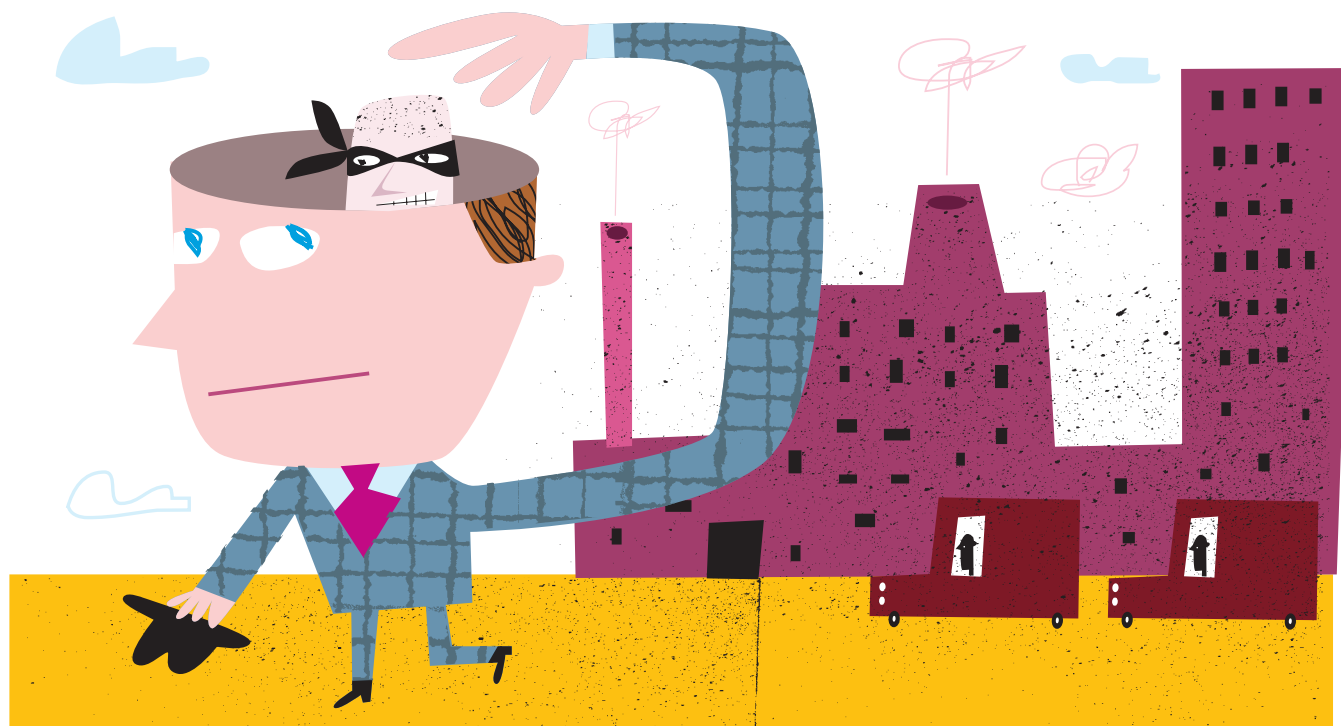
Like many business decisions, replacing older IT systems is a judgement call where you have to weigh up the costs of upgrading against the benefits of the new equipment. But usually the cost is worth it, particularly if you are using an outdated operating system (such as Windows 98 say) which are prone to security and reliability issues, not to mention most new hardware and software won't run on them.

 ACCOUNTING

 FINANCIAL PLANNING
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 LENDING

 LEGAL



By registering your trademark, you gain the exclusive right to use, license, or even sell it, for the goods and services it has been registered for. Before registering for a trademark, it's advisable to conduct a trademark search (which can be done online in many countries) to see if it has been registered by another company. You can be subject to legal action if someone else has already registered the mark you propose to use.

Designs are the features of shape, configuration, pattern or ornamentation, which gives a product a unique appearance. For example, if you were marketing a new soft drink and came up with a unique bottle design to differentiate your product, you could register the design to protect your right to use it exclusively. Design registration is meant to protect designs that have a commercial or industrial use so works of art are not eligible for design registration but can be protected under copyright. Designs are registered by submitting photos and/or illustrations of the design along with the required form to the government department that administers intellectual property. If your design is assessed as being new and it satisfies legal requirements, the registration will be accepted.

Copyright protects the way original ideas are expressed, not the ideas themselves. It is free and automatically covers original works of art and literature, music, films, sound recordings, broadcasts and computer programmes. Although copyright is an automatic right under international conventions, it can be registered in some countries for additional protection and legal evidence of claim to rights of use.

Trade secrets include such things as formulas (think Coca Cola!), processes, designs, instruments, patterns, or compilations of information that are not generally known or reasonably ascertainable and therefore are kept secret to give the owning business an advantage over their competitors. In comparison to a patent, it can be the right strategy when it's difficult to 'reverse engineer' the product to copy the construction, manufacturing process or formulation. Trade secrets can be protected by requiring employees and contractors to sign a confidentiality (non-disclosure) agreement before being given access to the information. Protecting the intellectual property of your business can be just as important as protecting other types of asset. If you are unsure where you stand with your intellectual property, consult with an expert.

choosing the right smartphone for your needs

The rapid pace of technological change can make it difficult to keep up with mobile telecommunications. With so many smartphone choices available, there are many factors to consider when choosing the right one for your personal requirements. The first step is to decide which features will help you become more productive in your work.

Email

Most smartphones give you the capability to access your email when out of the office. If you need to send lengthy emails, rather than just read them, you will want a model with a hardware keyboard instead of one with a touch screen keyboard. If you want 'push email' – where new messages are automatically delivered to your phone as they come in – you need to make sure the smartphone will work with your company's email server to provide this.

Syncing with your computer

Some smartphones will only sync with certain operating systems. So if you want to synchronise your calendar, contacts, addresses, etc with your smartphone, you will want to check that the phone is compatible.

Network range and reliability

Depending on your location, some phones are tied exclusively to one

telecommunications provider. If the smartphone you choose isn't available on a reliable network with suitable coverage, you may experience drop-outs and disrupted service.

Wi-Fi access

Free Wi-Fi access is often available in such locations as shopping centres and restaurants. If you choose a smartphone with Wi-Fi connectivity, you won't have to rely on your service provider (or use your data allowance) when you connect to the Internet.

Battery life

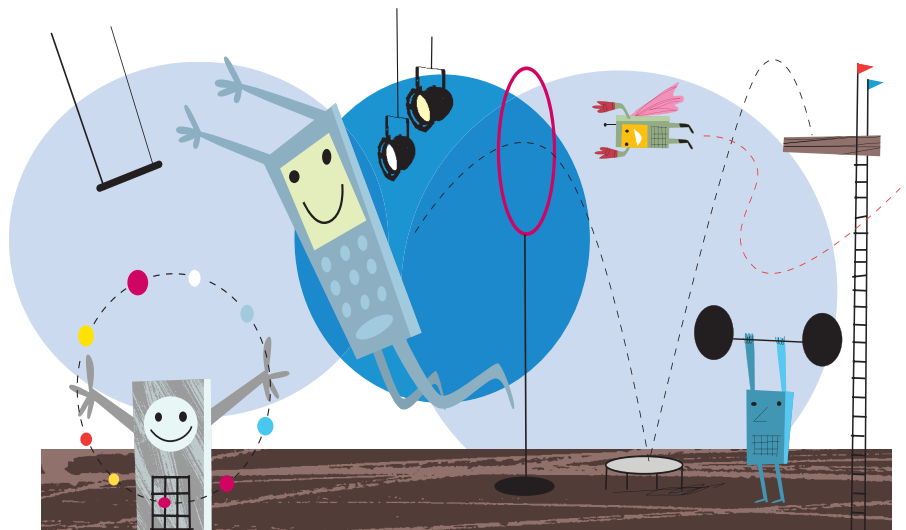
Battery life will vary depending on the smartphone you choose. As a minimum, you should be able to get a full day's work from your smartphone before having to recharge it.

Memory

If you will plan to store large files on your phone, you will want to consider the size and type of memory it has. Some have built-in memory while others rely on external media like SD cards. Memory ranges from 256 MB, found on many smartphones, to the 32 GB capacity on some iPhones.

Operating platform

The various smartphone operating platforms have their own benefits that should also be considered when choosing.



- The iPhone offers many multimedia features and the largest range of applications that are free, or can be purchased. It can be synced with Microsoft Exchange Server to receive emails and access calendars and contacts.
- The BlackBerry is able to integrate many of the features of Outlook, such as setting up an out-of-office notification remotely from your phone.
- Windows Mobile offers the familiarity of the Windows desktop operating system. In addition, it's known for its backup feature that allows users to backup their data to a password-protected website.
- Symbian is the world's most widely used platform. It's found in many Nokia smartphones and supports Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Excel documents.
- Google's Android platform features many Google applications such as Maps, Gmail and Calendar.

Voice features

With all the extra capabilities, don't forget that the phone is still the most important function. A good business smartphone will include a speaker phone, three-way calling, voice dialing and call waiting.

Multimedia features

Most business smartphones include features such as a camera with zoom capabilities and the ability to record and play video and audio.

Making the decision

Since the BlackBerry was introduced in 2002, the number of smartphones available has grown each year. With so many options to choose from, it can be challenging to select the best smartphone for your needs. To make a sound decision, consider which features you could use to boost your productivity, how and if the phone will connect to your desktop, the amount of memory you need, connectivity, the ease of use and the extra features available.

good personnel management means better profits

Most small businesses operate a tight ship. They manage overhead expenses and watch cost of sales to stay on the credit side of the ledger. But when you've reached a point where you cannot see any further ways to reduce costs, there could still be an opportunity to increase your profits through increasing productivity. Probably the most important way managers can increase productivity is in the way they manage their people. There are a number of practical steps you can take that revolve around your people management systems.

- Select the right person for the job
- Give them clear directions and clear systems to direct their work processes
- Manage the differences between your team members to get the best out of each person
- Don't ever think that they will put in the same effort that you, as the owner, will
- Document clear performance indicators so everyone understands just what's expected of them

Select the right person for the job

Granted it's always tough to really be sure in an interview, it's still the best tool you have. Consider questions such as whether the applicant fits in with your current team; are they the sort of personality you want to work with; do they seem to have a good work ethic; do they have enough experience and if not will they train up easily; do they have a history of useful contribution in their previous workplaces? Also prepare your interview questions carefully - it is quite legal to include technical questions and even practical exercises to assess skill level or capability. Ask questions about what they might do in a situation where a certain kind of problem arises. You'll be able to assess better whether they're a fit for your business. Settling for someone you're not sure about can be costly on your time and money, not to mention on team morale, if they don't work out.

Give them clear directions, and clear systems to work with

Most people will try to achieve what they think is expected of them. The biggest problem is in making sure your instructions and systems are not open to

misinterpretation. Take time to fully induct your new team member in the way you expect things to be done. Systemise your processes so they run smoothly and try to get them written down in procedure guides so employees can check on the correct way to do things, without wasting your time, if need be.

Manage the differences between your team members

Try to understand how each person ticks, what makes them feel motivated at work, and then deal with them on that basis. Some people are competitive - they want goals and targets and the autonomy to achieve them; others need plenty of close supervision; others thrive on praise and recognition. There are useful tools around that help you understand personality types and help you adjust your management style to get the best out of each person.

Accept that they won't have your drive

Your team members have a life outside work. For a salary, they are prepared to allot you some of their most precious commodity - their time. But your business is not theirs and its success won't have the same impact for them as it does for you. Don't expect them to perform as you do. Don't overburden them or you'll end up with reduced productivity and high turnover.

Document work related key performance indicators (KPIs)

KPIs have been around for a while now. And that's because they've been shown to work. They work because you set clear activities that are needed to achieve measurable targets, and that makes it easy for you and your team to see what's working and what isn't.

As a manager, give people encouragement and praise, provide them with constructive feedback and you'll see productivity and profits increase.

WEB PICK OF THE MONTH

Social Media Marketing Made Simple for Small Businesses explained in this short video by email marketing provider Constant Contact: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cygyw7x-PKc>

