

GORILLA GUIDE[®]

FOUNDATION EDITION



Enabling Small and Midsize Business IT in 2021

James Panetti

Inside the Guide

- ▶ 2021 Optimism: A Year of Recovery and Expansion
- ▶ Sustainability: Going Green Is Going Competitive
- ▶ People and Culture: Workforce Development vs. Recruitment and Turnover

Enabling Small and Midsize Business IT in 2021

By James Panetti

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: A Shifting Landscape.....	4
2021 Optimism: A Year of Recovery and Expansion.....	6
Remote Work.....	7
Sustainability.....	9
Digital Footprints.....	10
People and Culture.....	14

Copyright © 2021 by ActualTech Media

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. Printed in the United States of America.

ActualTech Media

6650 Rivers Ave Ste 105 #22489 | North Charleston, SC 29406-4829

www.actualtechmedia.com

Publisher's Acknowledgements



EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Keith Ward

DIRECTOR OF CONTENT DELIVERY

Wendy Hernandez

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Olivia Thomson

SENIOR DIRECTOR OF CONTENT

Katie Mohr

PARTNER AND VP OF CONTENT

James Green

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Panetti lives tech and writes about it. James specializes in writing about all manner of technology topics, including highly formal corporate policy and standards documentation, customer-facing product documentation, wikis, and informal blogs.

James has more than 16 years of tech experience spanning technical support, software performance testing, release automation, and cloud Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) technology.

Introduction: A Shifting Landscape

The global pandemic of 2020 substantively changed how we do business. Forecasts for 2021 and beyond show that this shifted landscape is anything but temporary. This Gorilla Guide® (Foundation Edition): Enabling Small and Midsize Business IT in 2021 explores how small to midsize businesses (SMBs) can best adapt and prepare for 2021 and beyond.

SMBs typically face significant challenges when it comes to IT, including limited resources, personnel, and funding. SMB admins tend to wear many hats, and the network admin is usually also the virtualization admin, the database admin, security admin, and more. They are literally jacks-of-all-trades, having very broad knowledge without the ability to specialize.

Many workers are more productive working remotely than when commuting to an office. They experience better attitudes, increased happiness, and decreased stress compared to their onsite counterparts, resulting in greater day-to-day employee availability.

The more midsize companies do have more specialization, but many of the same problems of budget and personnel persist. These limitations often mean that SMB IT departments spend a great deal of time firefighting, and not much time planning for the future and doing more bottom-line revenue-generating activities. Such is life at modest-sized organizations.

To survive and remain competitive, SMB leaders and IT administrators should prioritize remote work options, environmental sustainability, their digital footprint, and building a work culture that fosters long-term employee commitment (see **Figure 1**).



Figure 1: A combination of factors will enable SMBs to succeed in 2021 and beyond

2021 Optimism: A Year of Recovery and Expansion

2020 was a year like no other. Though recessions and depressions are not uncommon, the pandemic year was unique in that it required most workers to be shuttered within their homes. Many if not most businesses that survived did so by relying on their IT staff to immediately enable their workforce to work remotely.

Things are looking up for 2021, however. While the pandemic hasn't yet passed, the light at the end of the tunnel is becoming visible, and SMBs especially are poised for a major resurgence. This resurgence will depend heavily on their IT teams' ability to quickly implement and support new and expanded technology solutions.

54% of small business owners spent more on technology in 2020 than they had in 2019, a trend expected to continue in 2021.

GGV Capital and Hello Alice jointly published a [report](#) that reveals that 93% of a sample of 4,111 SMB owners plan to hire in 2021, and 75% of 784 owners plan to spend more on technology. This means IT departments will have no shortage of challenges in the coming year and must stay light on their feet.

Remote Work



ANYTHING BUT TEMPORARY

Remote work is the future. The events of 2020 went a long way to prove that not only is a remote workforce viable, it's also cost-effective, competitive, and profitable. Forecasts show that working from home is not a flash-in-the-pan trend that will pass anytime soon.

By June of 2020, an estimated 42% of the U.S. workforce was working [remotely](#). Moreover, 57% of SMBs plan to continue offering remote options to their workers after the pandemic, according to [a survey of 250 SMB leaders](#). This isn't just good news for the workers who benefit; it's good news for the IT departments on which this major shift will wholly depend.

The responsibility to ensure remote workers have secure, reliable, and speedy connections to company networks is a heavy one, but the effort can pay off exponentially. The same survey showed that many workers are more productive working remotely than when commuting to an office. They experience better attitudes, increased happiness, and decreased stress compared to their onsite counterparts, resulting in greater day-to-day employee availability.

SAVINGS AND PROFIT

A shift to remote work can translate into increased profits for SMBs, which in turn can mean more IT budget available for the technology critical for remote work.

Fewer workers onsite mean companies can invest significantly less capital in real estate and IT infrastructure. Meanwhile, virtual teams can help a business recover from 2020's lost revenue by boosting both efficiency and productivity. A [recent Forbes report](#) found that companies offering remote work options to their employees enjoyed close to a 21% increase in profits.

COMPETING FOR TALENT

Offering a remote work option can result in increased competition for talent. This can't be overstated, given that not only must companies compete with each other, but must also compete with a rising self-employment trend. [Since 2018](#), a growing percentage of workers have been joining "the gig economy" by going freelance.

This is notable for IT departments in two ways: Companies need the best talent they can afford running IT, and the demand for remote work options can result in increased technology spending. [According to one study](#), 54% of small business owners spent more on technology in 2020 than they had in 2019, a trend expected to continue in 2021. IT administrators will be more critical than ever to an SMB's success.

Sustainability



RESPONSIBLE SMBS ARE THE FUTURE

2020 tested every company's long-term sustainability, but SMBs were especially strained. 2021 may well turn the tables. The speed at which a company can pivot will be critical for surviving both the current disruption and the continued transformation.

That flexibility is mostly if not wholly dependent on IT teams. Just as a company's ability to rapidly adapt to the pandemic with technology decided the survivors of 2020, so will their ability to quickly shift gears determine their success in 2021. Increases in technology spending, remote work, and virtual services will hinge entirely on IT administrators.

GOING GREEN IS GOING COMPETITIVE

Responsible stewardship of the environment will be more of a key component to long-term sustainability than ever before. [One survey](#) found that an overwhelming 90% of consumers were equally or more concerned with environmental issues than before the pandemic began. This may be in part because much of the world saw, perhaps for the first time, environmental recovery as a side effect of everyone [sheltering at home during 2020](#).

Thus, the message is clear for 2021: Going green is going competitive.



According to [National Geographic](#), the World Health Organization says dirty air, both indoors and out, cuts short 7 million lives annually world-wide. As part of that total, air pollution kills more than 100,000 Americans every year.

SMBs are again best positioned to lead the way and, again, completely dependent on their IT teams to do so. The IT team's successful support of remote work will be key to enabling workers to forego rush-hour commutes and help cut carbon emissions post-pandemic. The pandemic year proved beyond any doubt that permanently reducing the volume of the morning and evening rush will go a long way toward healing our environment.

Digital Footprints

E-COMMERCE MUST BECOME PRIORITY

It's no surprise that e-commerce is only going to grow in priority in the years to come, but the pandemic escalated its growth rate dramatically. The pandemic accelerated demand away from physical storefronts and toward online shopping sites by five years, according to a recent report from [TechCrunch](#). Conversely, nonessential brick-and-mortar

stores are experiencing severe declines: a 25% drop during the first quarter of 2020, followed by a 75% decline during the second.

The economic threat to physical stores has been present since the beginning of the digital age, but the pandemic has accelerated the problem. To survive and thrive in 2021 and beyond, companies must pivot toward omnichannel communication with their customers. This means that, yet again, survival hinges heavily on IT administrators.

Consider that as [recently as 2018](#), only 52% of Europe's on-line stores, for example, had omnichannel communication. A large segment of the business world has simply been slow to adapt, which was made unpleasantly clear in 2020. IT teams can capitalize on this to empower their SMBs to take the lead. IT is wholly responsible for growing their workers' remote options on one hand, while also enabling the business to grow its digital footprint to meet a remote-working customer base on the other.

The economic threat to physical stores has been present since the beginning of the digital age, but the pandemic has accelerated the problem. To survive and thrive in 2021 and beyond, companies must pivot toward omnichannel communication with their customers.

Let's not overstate the trend, however, and consequently turn a blind eye toward other opportunities. Physical stores will always have a place, albeit perhaps a shrinking one. Companies willing to maintain a physical presence may find a better home in the suburbs in the remote-work future, instead of in urban storefronts catering to roving pedestrians.

THE DOMINANCE OF ALTERNATIVE PAYMENT METHODS

Contactless payment options rapidly (and unsurprisingly) rose to dominance in 2020. In fact, contactless payments increased by 69%, which is a foothold unlikely to be relinquished in the coming years.

Digital payments have long been proven as secure as they are convenient, and the ability to scan a card or phone app without any physical contact will no doubt remain an expected option. This is especially true for millennials, of whom only 40% carry physical currency on a regular basis.

THE DEMAND FOR VIRTUAL SERVICES

IT teams can also sharpen their SMBs' competitive edge by considering what services they can offer virtually. They need to ask themselves the question that launched a revolution: "Is there an app for that?"

The answer in so many cases was Yes. The pandemic greatly increased the demand for virtual services, evidenced by the rise of food delivery services, at-home fitness solutions, movie-streaming platforms, telemedicine, and personal

cybersecurity solutions. The same benefits can be offered, on a much smaller scale, by SMBs, too. It requires some creative thinking and resources, but the payoff in things like internal company efficiency, as well as external sales, could be substantial.

CUSTOMER REVIEWS ARE CRITICAL

The shift to a greater digital footprint means that online customer reviews become the very lifeblood of success. [A study in 2020](#) found that 65% of shoppers price-compare via their mobile devices while physically within a store, and 81% of them look to social media for insight. Yet [another study](#) found that a whopping 92% of would-be customers actually avoided completing a purchase if they couldn't find any relevant online reviews.

IT admins can save the day once again by empowering SMBs with tools that grow their digital footprint and encourage product reviews, especially if those tools can leverage social media platforms.

The shift to a greater digital footprint means that online customer reviews become the very lifeblood of success. A study in 2020 found that 65% of shoppers price-compare via their mobile devices while physically within a store, and 81% of them look to social media for insight.

People and Culture

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT VS. RECRUITMENT AND TURNOVER

As the economy begins its recovery, businesses will find that the fierce competition for workforce talent paused only for a moment during the pandemic and will resume in earnest.

Even as the way we all work changes, the human factor—the need for talent—will remain. SMBs should make retaining talent a priority. Many businesses, especially larger ones, find themselves trapped in a perpetual cycle of recruitment followed by turnover. Such a revolving door is very expensive.



According to the [Houston Chronicle](#), costs to replace an employee vary by their earning level, so training costs also vary. The Sasha Corp. averaged the results of 15 studies that determined average costs to replace an \$8 per hour employee, determining an average cost of \$9,444.47 per turnover. Even when the 33% of estimates with the highest prices were removed from calculations, replacement costs were \$5,505.80 per turnover. Chartcourse estimates it costs \$40,000 on average to replace a nurse, while *technology companies can run up replacement costs of more than \$125,000 per vacancy.*

SMBs can gain a competitive edge by investing in the continual development of their workforce. IT administrators are again centerstage, given that a growing remote workforce will need virtual training and development options.

Leveraging technology to produce quality training programs, webinars, and other e-learning options will go a long way toward ensuring that talented workers will remain for the long haul.

CULTIVATING CULTURE

While skill development is critical, it's not enough to fully empower workers to become the best they can be. Culture is key. A business's internal culture springs from its core principles and drives day-to-day behavior. In days of old, culture was largely defined within the physical office. Casual Fridays and team happy hours, for example, would go a long way toward building a tight, cohesive team.

In the coming years, the shift to remote work will change how culture evolves, and IT administrators will find themselves becoming a critical component in fostering its development.

Priorities—and budgets—must align to promote an office culture that spans both onsite and remote workers. Leverage technology toward this end to foster virtual happy hours, virtual lunches, and any other means that involves teams spending time with each other in a casual setting, even if from afar. IT teams will lead the way, and it will be their creativity and ingenuity that help cultivate a culture as rich and rewarding for remote workers as it is for those coming to the office.

GET USED TO THE 'NEW NORMAL'

Thanks for reading this Gorilla Guide. As you can see, it's both an exciting and challenging time for SMBs. Even with vaccines beginning to roll out, it's clear that the pandemic won't be vanishing immediately.

Meanwhile, the societal, including work-based, changes wrought by the disease will continue to be felt by IT departments the world over. Smart SMBs will get out ahead of these changes, seeing opportunities rather than problems. Acknowledging the "new normal" of remote work, and how to effectively manage it, is the place to start.

About ActualTech Media

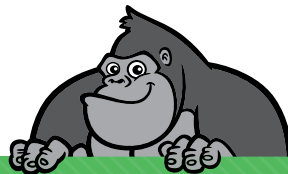


ActualTech Media

ActualTech Media is a B2B tech marketing company that connects enterprise IT vendors with IT buyers through innovative lead generation programs and compelling custom content services.

ActualTech Media's team speaks to the enterprise IT audience because we've been the enterprise IT audience.

Our leadership team is stacked with former CIOs, IT managers, architects, subject matter experts and marketing professionals that help our clients spend less time explaining what their technology does and more time creating strategies that drive results.



If you're an IT marketer and you'd like your own custom Gorilla Guide® title for your company, please visit

<https://www.gorilla.guide/custom-solutions/>