



By Angela Lewis

With such a rapid surge in the development of information technologies and social media tools, many self-employed members of the AITD (when not required onsite by a client), are now able to work from home instead of locked in an office or in a cubicle. While being able to work from home is something many people aspire to, it can feel isolated, unsupported and leave a person with the sense of being “out of the conversation”, particularly in regards to new developments and uses of IT and social media. I’ve been self-employed for 20 years and in this article I want to discuss some ways of using technology as an enabler, specifically for those of us who work from a home office.

If you are part of a large organisation you have access to their IT Help Desk and the decisions about how technology is used are not yours to worry about. You don’t have the luxury or worry of what software you should or should not be using, what security measures you need, who updates the website, who writes the company blog

Six Technology Tips for the Home-Based Consultant

and whether the company is on Twitter or Facebook. Self-employment makes those decisions yours, so here are my suggestions for utilising technology in 2011. You could decide to tackle one a week, one a month or pick and choose what you think might work for you:

1. Get yourself an “**IT Guy**” (or girl of course). It isn’t possible to understand every software package and application—even IF you are a geek or that way inclined. Ask around your consultant friends (see Twitter below) and find someone who is also a small operator, and do a deal where you can quickly ask a question, get out of an IT pickle, or have your webpage tweaked; while getting billed once a month. If you find someone helpful and explain you ultimately want to make website updates or install that printer yourself, you’ll find most of them are happy to share the information—because there is always going to be something trickier you will need them for. I found my IT guy through another consultant; while he’s in Brisbane and I

live in Melbourne, he has been one of my best business decisions.

2. Yes, we all use **email and calendar**, but why not make 2011 the year you *really* make it work for you. Set aside a quiet hour and really scrutinise the Help files, read some Outlook blogs, or watch some YouTube videos on how to do things such as set rules for incoming mail, how to have a slick folder system, how to set up safe-sender's lists, how to manage your junk mail, how to easily have blogs fed directly into an Inbox folder (RSS), how to manage multiple sign-offs and how to set up email so it doesn't ping all day and have you jumping up like Pavlov's dog each time a new email arrives. Make it a habit to also clean out your Inbox regularly. Consider doing it weekly or fortnightly if you receive a high volume, but make it at least every month—if you are on a corporate network you will be required to do this; but working alone it is easy to accumulate thousands of emails and feel swamped as a result.

3. **Spend a couple of hours getting to know LinkedIn.com**, a professional networking site where people showcase their work histories, skills and achievements. It's not difficult to use—if you can type your resume in Word or fill in an online form, then you are good to go for using LinkedIn. Businesses routinely use this site to look over someone's credentials if they are considering them for a contract or employment. Once you have joined make links to others you know professionally, and take the opportunity to have past and present clients or colleagues write you a recommendation or write one for them. I trained staff at Microsoft in the late

1980's and as a result I have a recommendation from a Microsoft employee on my LinkedIn profile, publicity I could never buy. Companies also habitually advertise positions and contracts here, making it an ideal site for coming across work opportunities. I have one consultant friend who routinely makes a LinkedIn connection to every person he meets both in a personal and professional capacity and now has a network of 500 people—making their connections available to him if he wants to leverage an introduction.

4. Are you mystified by **Twitter**? Still think it is for kids, nerds or marketers? Well think again, it can be a powerful way of making connections (both professionally and personally), a way to keep abreast of issues, developments and trends in your professional space and also a free way of marketing yourself and your services. Twitter is ranked as one of the top ten most visited sites in the world and there are believed to be currently about 100+ million users world-wide (granted many in the US, however getting in there early is no bad thing); so you can see there are unlimited possibilities for making connections.

In a nutshell it is a website you join with a user name, providing a brief description of yourself, your area of expertise and a link to your website. Once done you then you locate other businesses and individuals who tweet (write 140 character posts) on topics that matter to you. To illustrate its value: I tweet IT tips and hints and last month I tweeted that I was working on Microsoft Office 2010 manuals and also gave a free Outlook hint. Someone from Microsoft immediately started following

me and wrote a tweet offering any help or assistance I might want with manual content and complimented me on the tip; all of which hundreds of my followers were able to read.

5. **Add a blog** to your website or go to one of free providers such as wordpress.com and create one there. While people write blogs on topics of personal interest, for the love of writing or simply to pontificate, your intention would be to share advice and information in your field of expertise. I am an IT consultant, so I run a blog providing free tips, tricks and hints on using popular software such as Outlook, Word, Excel and PowerPoint. It is a value-add for my existing clients and shows would-be clients that I am generous with my time and share my expertise willingly. Don't feel like writing a blog? Well then go and comment on others (remember AITD have a blog and forum), because while reading blogs means you learn something or explore different ways of thinking, it also means you have the opportunity of publicising your website as you enter its address when you make the blog comment; so driving more interest back to your business.

6. **Facebook** is best known for being a personal webspace used by individuals to connect to their friends and swap social news and pictures. However the majority of corporations now have a Facebook business Page—just look for the 'Join us on Facebook' link on every any businesses' webpage and you'll see what I mean. You will need to join Facebook as an individual first and then just search the Help files for easy to follow directions for setting up a Page, which is what

celebrities, public figures and business uses for their presence, as opposed to a Profile. This site is used by the business entity to advertise special deals, for giveaways or some type of free advice or discount. The idea is that the business interacts in a more human and approachable way, while still showcasing their offerings. What I've done (and I'm not alone), is to link my blog to my Facebook business page, so that the link to a blog post automatically appears on my Facebook business page, thus streamlining my information sharing—you shouldn't need your IT guru for this, just read the Facebook help files. Of course I also jump on there myself and interact with the people who have chosen to 'like' my page.

Technology is an enabler and the social network tools allow us to be part of the conversation in our chosen fields, however don't feel pressured to always be accessible, nor to use them all. If you are worried about time and effort, keep in mind you don't have to be blogging, on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or even on email all day long. I know you will read recommendations advising you should tweet 5 times a day and blog daily to be successful, but I can tell you I don't do that—otherwise I wouldn't have time to work. However I might log into Twitter and spend 10 minutes scanning over the tweets and replying/commenting on something someone said, or tweet myself, or I'll pop into Facebook over lunchbreak and check if anyone has left a comment on my business page. If I feel like blogging I do, so sometimes that is a couple of times a week, other times once.

Remember, these are all simply suggestions to help you think about using technology for learning, broadening your networks and building your profile both professionally and personally and you should use them as, when and how you

feel best suits you. Perhaps give yourself a chance this year to road-test some of them in 2011, learning a little about each and then picking and choosing what works best for you.

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