Does your network save or cost you money?

This may sound like an odd question but it really isn't. A well designed network – be it local or cloud based- should be a money saver for your business. Think about how long simple things like bookkeeping took prior to the PC.

Of course a network that has problems or is poorly designed can be a nightmare. So what are the essential elements of a well-functioning network? Simplicity, documentation, and a consistent, well thought out network topology is key to smooth running. So what do you check for and what questions do you ask:

1: Do I really need a server? By Server we mean an expensive computer running Windows Server or Linux. In most small networks a decent workstation running Windows 7 will work fine as a file server. Keep it simple.

2: Do you have a detailed network map? That should contain the fixed IP of the server (workstation), the router, and all printers. Any VPN connections and terminal servers should be well documented in this map as well.

3: Does everyone who needs access to your data have it easily available? Terminal services, virtual machines, and VPN's solve this problem very well. Ask your employees, they will have an opinion!

The simplest network type is a workgroup and will work fine for most networks up to around 8 computers. The key is always document organization. Redirection of the My Documents, pictures, music folders etc. is a requirement for a smooth running business network. You can use a PC or a Server for document storage but all they should all be in the same folder. This will also allow for efficient remote backup of all documents.

As networks get a bit larger you should be looking at a windows domain. This client/server network is much easier to manage from a technical point of view, offers better security and with a little help will tend to just work and stay out of your way. It does require a server but that's a reasonable one- time expense. Documentation is key to success.