

Software solutions

This month, I thought I'd focus on some of the programs I use in my small business. I've already written about *PerfectIt* (www.intelligentediting.com), but here are other programs I use regularly:

- *Intervals*—to manage my projects (www.myintervals.com)
- *Dropbox*—to share files (www.dropbox.com)
- *Breakreminder*—to encourage me to take regular breaks (www.chegsoft.com/break.html)
- *Post-It Digital Notes*—to keep my desk free of post-it notes (www.3m.com; click on 'Products', then on 'Digital products')
- *SmartDraw*—to create diagrams (www.smartdraw.com).

Intervals

As those who know me well will confirm, I am not a well-organised person; therefore, setting up my own business was a real challenge. However, one year into the project, I am reasonably on top of things, thanks to *Intervals*. It's a fabulous project-management system, and I use it to run my business and all my external projects.

Basically, when a new job comes in, I create a project in *Intervals*, enter client details and project notes, and assign various tasks. For example, a typical editing job might include the tasks 'Set up job', 'Communicate with client', 'Edit—round 1', 'Edit—round 2' and 'Invoice'. For each task, I set the estimated hours, timeframe, priority and so on. Often, I can save time by copying a previous project, changing the details as necessary.

The beauty of *Intervals* is the richness of the information it produces, and at the heart of this is the timesheet. Imagine that I've worked for four hours editing a particular document. I click on 'Add time' in *Intervals* and it brings up a dialogue box with that day's date and my name automatically showing. I then click on the appropriate client, project and task from drop-down lists, and record the four hours worked, plus notes on what I actually did. This is very quick and easy, and it reduces the chance that I will mistakenly do a task for which I'm not being paid. For example, if I've been editing a document and have noticed that it needs to be formatted, I can easily see from the 'Add time' dialogue box whether 'Formatting' is a task for this particular project.

Various parts of the program allow me to see hours worked in a week (and the proportion of those that are billable), projects worked on, deadlines missed, tasks that have gone over time, and so on. A 'Reports' function allows me to check my progress on a particular project by creating a summary showing the different tasks, hours spent and notes from the timesheet.

A downside to *Intervals* is that it doesn't link with MYOB, but apparently the company is working on this.

You can trial a single project version of *Intervals* for free, and then move to a more sophisticated version (starting with the basic at US\$20 per month) if it meets your needs.

Dropbox

Dropbox is an online application that makes it easy to share files rather than emailing them back and forth. I use it to share files with clients and subcontractors, and have found it very effective (except with one client, who cannot access the files due to controls on their system).

Advantages of *Dropbox* are that it:

- is easy to use
- looks professional (other services I investigated featured scantily clad women, and thus weren't suitable for liaising with clients!)

- allows you to share files (e.g. designed documents) that are too large to send by email
- allows you to organise multiple files into neat subfolders, rather than attaching the files to an email and overwhelming the recipient
- is accessible from anywhere with internet access
- provides a quick and easy way to backup files; I use it as a temporary backup at the end of each day.

Dropbox provides a couple of gigabytes of space for free, and you can increase the amount of free space by encouraging friends and relations to sign up for the service.

Breakreminder

A sore shoulder caused by an 11-hour editing marathon (I was trying to meet a somewhat unrealistic deadline!) prompted me to look for a program that would force me to take breaks. I chose *Breakreminder* because it provides a range of exercises and can be set to force you to stop work at regular intervals.

I have to admit that, initially, I sat with my hand hovering over the mouse during the 15-second micropause that came up at 5-minute intervals. However, since my physiotherapist gave me remedial exercises that match those that come up on the screen, I've started actually doing the *Breakreminder* exercises. The program can be customised for prevention, treatment or intense treatment.

Breakreminder currently costs about US\$60 for one year, with discounts for multiple users or years of subscription.

Post-It Digital Notes

When the little notes sticky taped to the edge of the shelf above my computer screen started to obscure my view of the screen, I realised it was time to find a program that would help me to get organised. I trialled *Post-It Digital Notes* and decided to buy it because it was relatively cheap and I liked the way it could be customised. The program is a little clunky, but quite versatile—you can change colours, fonts and layout, and add photos, alarms and links to the notes. I now have two 'memoboards' on my desktop, one for home and one for work, each adorned with brightly coloured virtual sticky notes.

Post-It Digital Notes currently costs US\$19.99.

SmartDraw

In the past I have used *MS Visio* to prepare diagrams, but it wasn't part of the MS Office package that came with my computer. When I needed to create a flowchart for a recent job, I looked online for *Visio* and came across recommendations for *SmartDraw*, which looked a bit more versatile. Again, I trialled the program before buying; I liked the interface (it has a ribbon that is much like the one in the Office 2007 suite) and the 'Smartpanel', which made it very easy to create diagrams. I'm now using *SmartDraw* to turn all my procedures into flowcharts, and to create an organisation chart for my business.

SmartDraw currently costs about US\$200.

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