There’s a clock ticking as you read this. The clock is always ticking, but at SightLife, they hear it more acutely than the rest of us.

SightLife is an 80-person non-profit based in Seattle, Washington. The largest eye bank in the United States, it serves regions in the western U.S. and other countries. In 2009, SightLife helped restore sight to more than 4,000 people through corneal transplants.

Many more are waiting. Ten million people around the world have a blindness that could be corrected with donated corneas. Ninety percent of these are in developing countries. One million are blind children who, without the ability to see, statistics show, are likely to die within one to two years.

Over the past five decades, SightLife has helped restore sight in 58 countries and is a leading partner in establishing eye banks internationally.
and recover the donor’s cornea. We then have less than 14 days to get those corneas transplanted anywhere on the globe. In faraway places, we’re using rail, air, donkeys, or whatever it takes to get the tissue to the surgeon. We are constantly in a fight against the clock.”

Adds Tim McLaughlin, chief financial officer at SightLife: “An IT infrastructure that gives us constant communications and updated information is critical to us.”

Hard work, good management and IT strategies, and an IT partner named Networks Now! have helped SightLife grow 25 percent annually in the number of people it’s been able to serve in the past few years—up from single digit growth. Every gain in productivity made without increasing the budget helps bring the gift of sight to that many more blind people.

Minutes count
“We’re dealing with time-sensitive material on a 24×7 cycle,” explains Sandy Jeghers, chief marketing officer at SightLife. “When a donor passes away, we have 14 hours to get a technician on site, clear all of the paperwork, and recover the donor’s cornea. We then have less than 14 days to get those corneas transplanted anywhere on the globe. In faraway places, we’re using rail, air, donkeys, or whatever it takes to get the tissue to the surgeon. We are constantly in a fight against the clock.”

Staying alive
Meanwhile, down in Fort Worth, Texas, Randy Freeman and his team don’t help people see—they help them breathe and eat.

Freeman is the owner of Mediwell, a medical equipment company that rents equipment for home healthcare, including oxygen and enteral nutrition (tube feeding) equipment.

His challenge is common to many businesses: revenue has dropped. “We’re dealing in a reduced reimbursement environment,” Freeman notes. “We have taken cuts every single year for the last five years. So we’re serving more patients for less money—and we’re able to do it by being innovative.”

Mediwell, like SightLife, counts heavily on effective IT strategies from its IT partner. “In the three years I’ve worked with The Fulcrum Group for IT help, I’ve had a 40 percent growth in the total number of customers that I serve while
only increasing my general staff by two people,” Freeman reports.

What can Mediwell and SightLife teach us? Your business may not be about life and death—but in this economy, it might feel like it is. Here are eight IT strategies these two companies use to do more with less.

1. Lean on your IT partner to gain efficiency
Mediwell has only 28 employees; SightLife has 80. IT is a force multiplier making each business more productive. To use IT well, they’ve turned to IT partners that understand their goals and find innovative ways to achieve them.

For instance, Mediwell asked Symantec Partner The Fulcrum Group for assistance with a classic business challenge: improving cash flow. “Our Days Sales Outstanding (DSO) five years ago was running close to 85 days—the length of time between putting the equipment out to being paid,” explains Mediwell’s Freeman. “The Fulcrum Group put us in touch with someone who did custom programming for us. Now, I have direct visibility into our accounts payable; for instance, we were getting a certain type of denial on a particular insurance every single time, and thus we changed our method of billing it. We’ve reduced our DSO from 85 days to under 35 days for each of the past six months—a more than 100 percent gain in collection productivity.”

At SightLife, Symantec Partner Networks Now! has approached IT vendors and received donations of laptops, desktops, software licenses, firewalls, and switches—including smart phones that keep executives connected to support the organization’s 24×7 schedule. “Networks Now! has done so much to give us the instant access we need,” says SightLife’s McLaughlin.

2. Challenge unexamined assumptions
Big opportunities to do more with less can be revealed by challenging assumptions. For example, Mediwell has shown it can help treat people at home for one-third to one-tenth of the cost of the same treatments in a hospital, Freeman points out.

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– Randy Freeman, Owner, Mediwell, Inc.

Are you ready for the growth that IDC projects for the next four years?*

- **400%** increase in digital information in society
- **20%** growth in IT budgets
- **10%** increase in IT staffing

* IDC, The Diverse and Exploding Digital Universe, 2008
And Mediwell’s IT partner challenged the assumption that small businesses should back data up to tape. The Fulcrum Group deployed Symantec Backup Exec with a HighRely eSATA backup drive system from Highly Reliable Systems. “The HighRely drive is a hard-drive chassis that enables us to swap the drive in and out every day without the issues you can run into if you disconnect and reconnect a USB drive,” says Steve Meek, co-founder and president of The Fulcrum Group. “And at under $1,000, it was one-tenth the cost of an entry-level SAN at the time, and a fraction of what a good tape drive would cost. Now we can back up much faster and more reliably to it than we could to a tape drive.”

3. Shed manual work: automate and simplify
What’s a simple way to make people in your company more valuable? Automate the manual tasks they perform, observes Stanley King, president and founder of The Alchemy Solutions Group. King’s company consults with businesses to measure the economic and operational impact of their technology projects.

Automation gives people more time to innovate, King explains. “I’ve pulled IT teams together and asked them ‘If you could automate the manual tasks you do, what’s a more strategic project you could be ‘working on’?” he says. “And they instantly—I mean without hesitation—fire back 10 or 12 different strategic needs that they just don’t have time to get to. When they see they can automate a manual task, they are anxious to do it.”

Automation made a big difference at SightLife. Networks Now! had set up Symantec Backup Exec System Recovery to automate image-based backup of key workstations, laptops, and servers. “On two separate occasions in the last two months, we’ve been able to save two workstations that went down at SightLife,” notes
Brian Dwinelle, SightLife client representative and network engineer at Networks Now! “If we had re-built them with manual recovery methods, it would have taken six hours to two days. Instead, we were able to perform an image-based recovery using Symantec Backup Exec System Recovery and get them up and running in about an hour and 10 minutes.”

One of those two systems is used to count cells in donated corneas, Dwinelle adds. It’s a complex workstation and would have taken two full days to rebuild manually. Instead, re-imaged with Backup Exec System Recovery, it was up and running the same day.

“Losing that workstation for an extra day would have worked against our clock,” notes SightLife’s Jeghers. “It freezes us. We could have a donated cornea that’s going to give somebody the gift of sight, and all of a sudden, that’s gone.”

4. Outsource to gain efficiencies

Another way SMBs can do more with less is to turn to cloud services for certain needs, notes The Alchemy Solution Group’s King. “The cloud services supplier is sharing the cost of its infrastructure among many companies,” he points out. “There are constant changes in any area of IT, and new threats and risks coming up all the time. So, one of the benefits of getting a cloud service is that the provider has the responsibility and the resources for upgrading infrastructure and keeping it as current as possible. They assume the burden of providing a secure, reliable infrastructure that would otherwise fall to the business owner.”

Networks Now! helped SightLife determine that it would be better off getting two of its most important applications, The Raiser’s Edge for fundraising and Financial Edge for financial management, as cloud services from Blackbaud, a provider of technology solutions.
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– Sandy Jeghers, Chief Marketing Officer, SightLife

Their prior security software was not installed or updated consistently. We put Symantec Endpoint Protection on their systems as the security standard, and we can administer it centrally. From a single, remote console, we have the ability to modify policies, roll out new standards, and get updates out to everyone automatically.

The contrast is substantial. “Before we had Symantec Endpoint Protection, it seemed like we had a computer down every day with some security problem,” recalls Freeman. “Ever since, we’ve had no significant disruption from malicious code.”

6. Need time? Cut motion
How can Mediwell serve 40 percent more customers yet increase its staff of 26 by just two people? “One way is by creating efficiencies,” Freeman explains. “We do a lot of old-fashioned time-and-motion studies. We look at exactly what a person is doing in their job and break it down, A,B,C, and D. Then we figure out exponentially how many minutes they’re using over a year for different tasks. And we decide if we need to add another person for this job, or if we can just offload the simpler tasks such as documentation to someone who might like to work from home or be part-time contract labor.

“Tasks not only get done with greater cost-efficiency,” Freeman reports, “but key employees become better thinkers. Instead of being so overwhelmed, they have time to think and improve processes.”

7. Gain visibility—then prioritize
Mediwell also deployed Fleet Director from Teletrac to locate, track, and
monitor the position and operations of its vehicles. “It tells us where our delivery drivers and service technicians are every minute of the day, so we can actually direct a delivery,” Freeman notes. “People are very pleased with how fast we can get to their home.”

Using Teletrac, Mediwell has been able to accommodate its 40 percent increase in customers without adding drivers. “The added visibility provided by Fleet Director helps us increase efficiencies,” Freeman points out. “We identified that it took drivers an average of 52 minutes to do an equipment pickup—and that was interfering with our ability to quickly take care of our most important customers, our referral customers. If we do a poor job of taking care of them, then we don’t receive referrals. So we decided to outsource pickups, and that’s resulted in our drivers being able to do two extra deliveries a day. That’s why we haven’t had to hire another driver. And the delivery drivers actually love their jobs again.”

8. Got paper? Minimize it
SightLife worked with Networks Now! to set up VPN connectivity to hospitals, enabling medical records to be viewed online securely. “It used to take us an hour to receive a 250-page medical chart by fax,” Networks Now!’s Dwinelle recalls. “By getting the chart electronically, we not only get it faster, we can review it with the nurse in the hospital by looking at the same screen together. That cuts our review time in half. And if it’s a ‘disallow’—a situation that doesn’t fit our requirements—we can save the time and expense of sending a recovery technician to the hospital.”

What’s the result of IT strategies like these? On the day you read this, an average of 11 people are opening their eyes and seeing for the first time. That’s due to a thoughtful donor, SightLife, talented medical professionals, and an IT infrastructure that coordinates everyone to beat a ticking clock.

There are many rewards—big and small—for doing more with less. •

Alan Drummer is Creative Director for Content at NAVAJO Company. His work has appeared in CIO Digest, Los Angeles Times, Create Magazine, and on The History Channel.