



Getting The Most From Your IT Service Provider

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Small businesses face many challenges every day – finding good IT support is one of them.

IT support can present unique challenges to business owners because many people feel intimidated by the technical nature of IT. This can result in uninformed decisions concerning the best way to get support for their business.

Even though American small businesses spend billions of dollars each year on IT support, most of them don't have a thoughtful IT support strategy to ensure they are getting the most bang for their buck. The following seven strategies will help you get the most from your provider of technical support.

Seven Strategies to Get the Most from Your IT Support Provider

1. Establish a relationship with a provider

Dig your well before you are thirsty. Don't just call an IT support provider when you have a technical support emergency; get to know one while sailing is smooth and build a stable relationship with them. This will help them get to know you, your needs, and your systems during a time of relative calm, which is easier on everyone. That way when you really do need them, they'll be prepared and able to help you as efficiently as possible.

2. Treat your IT support provider like a part of your team

As a continuation of tip number one, treat your IT support provider as a part of your team, not just a vendor. The more you are open with them about your goals, priorities, and concerns, the more they will be able to help you. Show them the trust and respect of a professional, and they will bend over backwards for you.

3. Be clear about your expectations

Every business has different needs and expectations. Some can't afford any downtime and must to be up 24/7, while others are just fine if their computers don't work for a few hours and don't need to pay higher rates to ensure uptime. Unless you are clear about what you want, your service provider may never meet your expectations. Be clear about your needs and expectations so your service provider can align their service and costs accordingly.

4. Let them monitor your systems

In today's always-on world, IT support professionals have access to amazing remote monitoring and management tools that let them keep a watchful eye on your business 24/7. These tools allow them to do their jobs more effectively and efficiently by monitoring the health of your systems and alerting your IT support team of a possible problem before it becomes a disaster. This decreases costs and the likelihood of computer downtime.

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5. Find someone with experience in your industry and systems

You don't want your IT support specialist to learn on the job while you are picking up the tab. Find someone who has experience with other companies in your industry, and in the majority of the hardware and software you use. At the same time, be realistic and understand that your technical support team may not have experience in everything you use – no two businesses are the same. If you sign a contract with them, most will be happy to make the investment in learning the technology at their cost as a sign of commitment to a long-term relationship with you.

6. Find a provider that is proficient in remote support

Travel time is expensive, and 90% of IT support issues can be resolved over the phone or Internet. Find a service provider that is staffed to provide effective remote support so you can minimize the costs and wasted time associated with waiting for a service provider to drive to your office.

7. Know your options

There are two primary methods of support for small businesses: Hourly Support and Managed Services. Here's what you should consider about each:

Hourly IT Support

This is the way that businesses have traditionally been supported – by hiring an hourly IT consultant to help them manage and support their business IT needs. While many businesses have moved away from this model in recent years – adopting a Managed Services model instead – it may still be a good fit for your business.

The primary benefit of hourly support is that you only use it when you need it. For many small businesses, this is perfect because they are small enough that they rarely run into issues that require outside help.

The downside of hourly support is that when you do need it, it can get awfully expensive very quickly. Consultants typically charge anywhere from \$100 to \$150 per hour for support, making it easy for a business to quickly run up a large tab.

To determine if hourly support is the right model for a business, they must really consider the expected frequency of support use and the potential downside if something goes wrong. More and more businesses are finding that this downside is too great, which is why we are seeing a rapid shift towards this second model of support, Managed Services.

Managed Services

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What is Managed Services?

“Managed Services” is a term used by IT support providers to describe an ongoing IT management relationship with a client that generally includes the proactive management of the client’s technology (versus just reactively responding when something is wrong) for a flat monthly fee.

This combination of proactive services on a flat monthly budget can really benefit small businesses by removing some of the costly surprises that come with working with a service provider on an hourly basis.

The primary benefits of this model are two-fold:

- Flat-fee billing – While not all issues will be covered under a flat fee, most are. This allows the small business to create a more predictable budget and alleviates some of the stress associated with potential IT support budget swings.
- Proactive care – Due to the nature of the flat-fee contract, the service provider is incentivized to keep costs low, so they do what they can to proactively manage and avoid larger problems.

There are many other secondary benefits to Managed Services as well.

So which is the right model?

Each business should look at its individual needs to make a good decision. However, more and more businesses are turning to Managed Services for its many benefits. Most small businesses will have to look for a good reason *not* to use Managed Services for their IT support needs.

Choosing a service provider requires careful research

Choosing a service provider is not a decision to be taken lightly. Not only will you likely have a long-term relationship with this company, but you will be giving them access to your most sensitive business data and systems. Making a bad choice can be very costly.

The following are questions you should ask in your evaluation process to ensure that you get the right fit for your business:

1. Do they have at least three references you can speak with?
2. Do they have testimonials they can provide?
3. How long have they been in business?
4. What is their response time for normal support calls?
5. Do their service hours match your business hours?
6. Will they work on a flat-fee basis?
7. Will they proactively monitor your systems?
8. Are they offering their services at realistic prices to ensure they can stay in business and staff appropriately?

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9. Do you have a reasonable way of getting out of your contract with them if you are unhappy with their service or your needs change?
10. If you have multiple locations, do they have the ability to provide coverage for all of them?
11. Do they have the size/scale to service the number of employees you have?
12. How many years – on average – do their technicians have?
13. Do they have an office you can tour?

The #1 Mistake Small Businesses Make When Choosing an IT Service Provider

Small businesses are naturally resource-constrained, so they always have to make decisions with budgets in mind. However, when choosing an IT service provider, they often make the decision of which service provider to work with based on price, when they should make it based on total cost of ownership.

It is tempting to make a decision on price alone, but price is only one of the factors that go into calculating total cost of ownership. With regard to IT services in particular, many other factors will determine the total cost to the small business:

- Hardware costs
- Software costs
- Total time to problem resolution
- Employee downtime
- Poor technology-related choices and decisions

All of these factors should be considered when choosing an IT service provider.

Most IT service providers don't have the resources to provide services that adequately address these issues on behalf of their small business clients. They know this, so they try to compensate by marketing their services based on price.

While the small business may save some money in the short term, they ultimately pay a high price in employee frustration, lost productivity, and technology purchases that aren't the best fit for their business.

Obviously, we don't advocate that small businesses just purchase from a higher-priced service provider and expect that everything will be better, so how should a small business avoid the challenges mentioned above?

First, take a tour of your IT service provider's office. Do they have the team and resources to provide immediate service to you when necessary, or are they a "one-man band"?

Second, ask if they offer a flat-fee service model. Flat-fee contracts incentivize your service provider to reduce the number of problems you experience, while hourly service providers make money when their clients are in trouble – not the incentives you want them to have!

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Finally, ask if they offer any service guarantees. Do they stand by their word? Do they guarantee performance of your network and response time when something goes wrong?

By focusing on these issues rather than price alone, small businesses can avoid experiencing an unnecessarily high total cost of ownership with regard to their information technology systems.

If you have any questions, please contact us at [888.860.2074](tel:888.860.2074) or stevec@keymethods.net.

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