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Choosing an IT Partner

Whether you have just decided to outsource your computer and network support or are looking to change provider, choosing the right company to work with can be a daunting and time consuming prospect.

Here are a few tips to help ease the process and de-mystify the world of IT Support Outsourcing.

Do your Homework

Before starting to look for potential partners it is important that you have an idea of what you want. You may say 'but I don't know what I want, that's why I'm looking for a specialist!' but you will know what your own expertise is, how much time you have to devote to IT support, what your budgets are and what your Company plans are for the future. It's important to be honest with potential suppliers about these points as they will form the foundation of your contract and relationship with your provider.

What Level of Cover do you Need?

Thinking about your own in-house expertise and the amount of time you are able, or willing, to devote to IT you can now start to determine the sort of cover you need. How important is your IT infrastructure to your business? Can you cope with downtime or are your systems the lifeblood of your business? Which items of equipment are most important to you? For some companies, a printer not working is not the end of the world but for a warehouse, that may mean they cannot print delivery notes and get goods out of the door.

Your Support Contract should include **Guaranteed Response Times** and these should be included for both the initial investigation of the fault and also getting someone onsite if necessary. It's no good having a 2 hour telephone response and then your supplier not being able to get an engineer to you for 3 days if they need to visit! Generally, you will not be offered guaranteed fix times unless you have deep pockets or your contract includes for complete replacement of faulty equipment, as there are too many variables involved, but the contract may include a best endeavors clause or allowance for loan equipment to cover business critical items.

Do you need out-of hours cover? Are you happy with cover from 9 – 5, Monday – Friday or do you work weekends, bank holidays, evenings? If out-of-hours cover is included is this remote support only or are engineers available for site visits at these times?

Taking into account how much time and expertise you have in house, are you looking for a break/fix contract or do you need ongoing monitoring and administration?

A **break/fix contract** covers you for items that have failed, a physical hardware failure or



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Break/fix contracts are the cheapest contracts available and you should expect to pay extra for any new works or administration, such as adding new users, installing new software or equipment and installing software patches and updates.

Preventative Maintenance contracts will be more expensive but will include works such as monitoring your systems for any issues such as backups failing, anti-virus not updating, network failures and server resource problems. These may be carried out remotely or may include a site visit at regular intervals, probably once every six months or quarterly. This takes away the time consuming tasks of applying critical updates and patches as well as the regular checks that should be carried out on backups and security on your network.

You should still expect to pay for additional works such as installing new equipment and maybe administration tasks such as adding new users, depending on the individual terms of your contract.

IT Outsourcing contracts are your top level contracts, where you are employing a company to take control and manage all your IT infrastructure and issues. These will be the most expensive but should include all preventative maintenance, administration and regular onsite visits, once a month or bi-monthly. Depending on the individual terms of your contract you may still need to pay for additional works such as new equipment installation or you may get a number of hours a month included in your contract for jobs like this.

Telephone, Remote or On-Site?

There are many ways of delivering support to customers. The first method of contact is usually via telephone or email to establish the nature of the problem. If the problem is simple then the engineer may be able to talk you through the resolution either with step by step email instructions or over the telephone.

If the issue is a little more complex and you have internet connectivity, then the engineer can connect to the faulty PC or server securely, see what is happening and take control of the machine to try and resolve the fault remotely.

If the problem involves a physical hardware failure, there is little or no internet connectivity or the issue is more complex, a site visit will be needed to fix it.

Make sure that your contract provides the level of cover you need, for example, telephone and remote support only contracts will be inexpensive but how much will you be charged for a site visit if required and how long will it take to organise this? How will you be billed and how will you keep track of these invoices and the time spent?

Small and Local or Large and Nationwide?

What size of company do you want to work with? Each has their pro's and con's and your decision should be based upon the level of expertise you require, your budget and how important your IT infrastructure is to your business.



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Very small and one-man band organisations will generally offer a lower cost and more flexible service. They may also be specialists in your particular industry. With just a couple of members of staff you will get to know them well and they should get to know your systems and the way that you work too.

On the downside, if they are ill, on holiday or dealing with another customer will they provide any back-up cover and at what level will that be? With just 1 or 2 people will they have the breadth of knowledge to understand and manage your whole network infrastructure and will they be able to leverage the offers and discounts available to larger companies when it comes to purchasing new equipment, parts etc? They will generally only be able to service a fairly local area, so not good if you have offices around the country and are looking for a single supplier.

Mid-sized companies will normally offer a portfolio of service contracts but should also have some flexibility to tailor a solution for you, maybe including out of hours or weekend support. With a small team of engineers they will be able to cope with absence and holidays but you should still be able to know the members of the team looking after you and they will be small enough to know all of their customers.

There should also be a breadth of knowledge throughout the team and they should be leveraging their Partner status with manufacturers within the industry to back up this knowledge and be able to offer a range of new products and solutions at market prices.

There will be fewer Con's than with a very small company but you may find that they cannot provide nationwide coverage and out of hours and weekend coverage may be limited to telephone or remote support.

Large corporate support companies will generally offer a portfolio of fixed contract options but may not be willing to offer a tailored solution if these don't fit your needs. The large number of engineers they employ means that they can often offer faster guaranteed response times and also a nationwide service. They should have a wide range of expertise, especially in the Enterprise products for larger organisations.

As a minus, with that number of engineers, you may not speak to the same person twice and they will probably not have a good grasp of your company or network setup. You may find yourself having to explain your IT infrastructure each time an engineer turns up onsite.

Being such a large organisation, they may have set procedures for repair tasks in order to maintain repair or fix times. This may mean that equipment is simply replaced rather than repaired, and/or supplied as factory default to you, meaning you lose any data or software installed. You may also find that they will only cover certain items such as the PC's laptops and Server and will not investigate faults relating to your network, broadband or 3rd party software.

Selecting your provider

So you have decided on the support you need and have found some potential providers.

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What next? The important thing is to meet with all your prospective suppliers. They should want to visit your premises in order to see the equipment that you have and get a feel for the way you work.

Depending on how their contracts are priced (per person or per item of equipment) they may ask for an asset list of your equipment. This is useful for you to put together anyway and should include a description of the equipment, the serial number and whether it is still in warranty or not.

Ask for a copy of the contract to accompany the quotation. This allows you time to compare response times, what is included in the contracts and other terms between providers. Check the termination clauses and whether the contract rolls on annually automatically or is for a set period of time.

Ask for the company's support telephone number to see how easy it is to log a fault. If the company uses an automated system, this isn't necessarily a bad thing, but is it easy to use and do you get confirmation your call has been logged? Can you speak to a human being if you need to?

Your prospective suppliers may offer a free healthcheck of your network. This is good as it will help to unearth any possible issues you may have and also allows them a better understanding of the equipment and setup they may be working with.

There are bound to be recommendations that come out of this and these should not be ignored, but bear in mind that there is often more than one way to do things and companies have their preferred methods and suppliers. Especially if changing provider, don't assume that something has been done incorrectly or is bad just because another method is recommended to you. It may be your original provider has set it up this way to compliment something else on your network. Talk through these recommendations with the potential supplier, find out the reasons behind their advice and, if you want to proceed, formulate a project plan. Unless something is drastically wrong such as backups not working or security problems, it may be best to wait a couple of months before implementing these recommendations. That way the new provider has a feel for your network and should see any potential conflicts with what they have put forward. It also ensures you are happy with the new relationship and are confident in their abilities.

Once you have made your decision and the contract is signed, make sure you receive and keep your signed copy safe, along with any future updates and amendments. Ensure all employees are aware of the processes needed to contact the new company, such as dedicated support telephone numbers or email addresses and any information they need to hand when they log a call. Also, make them aware of the terms of the contract such as response times.

And finally, keep in contact! Your IT support provider is there to help you and should take an interest in your company whatever the level of cover you have with them. If you are considering changes then talk to them as it is easier to plan and manage any projects than pick up the pieces afterwards!

