

21 questions you should ask your IT support firm

Choosing a managed service provider is an important decision. A good choice helps a business grow and avoids pitfalls. A poor one can waste your money on poor technology choices to open up dangerous risks. The right approach is to compare several potential choices and ask pertinent questions about their business, technical abilities, and service. Verify their answers with outside information. Then you can compare the answers you get from each of them and pick one that will suit your needs, or, if necessary, keep looking.

Business Quality

1. What is the company's culture? You need to meet with the staff, not just the salespeople for the right managed service provider. Ask who will be your account representative and have a talk with him or her. A provider which is right for a military contractor might not be a good fit for an entertainment business, and vice versa. Whatever their style, they should be competent, dedicated to solving problems, and responsive. A provider your people can comfortably talk with has a good chance of providing the results you need. One which is unresponsive or defensive will be a constant problem.

2. What do their facilities look like? Does the provider have a real office? A business which is set up in a home or a warehouse may be one with low overhead, but it could also have low staying power. One that's excessively luxurious may prove needlessly expensive. A business that looks professional, with everything there for a purpose, is an encouraging sign.

3. How big is the staff? There's no one best answer to this question. If your needs are extensive, a large staff may be better able to handle them. It's less likely to land in trouble if a key person leaves or gets sick. On the other hand, a large company may be more interested in its large customers. A small customer might be lost in the shuffle.

4. Who are their partners? No service provider can do everything by itself. One that has high-quality partners to call on for specialized tasks will get you through tough situations better. Their connections are also a sign that other tech businesses take them seriously.

5. What is their business roadmap? A service provider that is winging it isn't in a good position to help with someone else's long-term growth plans. A business with a definite idea of how it will grow is more likely to succeed and to expand its offerings. However, a provider with an unrealistically aggressive growth schedule could end up in bankruptcy.

6. Do they have references? A managed service provider can claim whatever it likes. You need to talk to the customers and find out whether it delivers on what it claims. If you can't, that's a disturbing indicator. Chasing down the references and getting them to talk about their experience could take some time, but it's well spent.

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Technical Quality

7. What are their competencies? Seeing the list of a service provider's certifications gives an indication of its technical quality and where its strengths are focused. The provider's technical strengths should be a good match for your needs; a strict Linux specialist isn't much help for a Windows shop. You should ask what educational programs they use to keep their staff up to date on the latest tech.

8. What is out of their scope? You need to know what they can do and what they can't or don't. This is especially important if they're talking about a flat-rate or inclusive price. Does their service include software patching, network monitoring, server upgrades, hardware installation, ISP issues, etc.? Is anything missing which is a deal breaker? Are some of the services extra-cost options?

9. What is their disaster recovery/business continuity plan? We aren't talking here about how they can help you with disaster recovery, though that's important. We're talking about how they will be able to recover if something catastrophic happens to their own facilities. A natural disaster can hit multiple businesses in an area. Until they're up and running again, they can't do much to help you to recover.

10. What compliance frameworks do they support? How important this question is depends very much on your business. If HIPAA, PCI, or GDPR compliance is important, you need a managed service provider with the tools and certifications to deal with it. Check if they offer SLA options that guarantee the compliance you require. Mistakes are costly.

11. What use do they make of automation? An MSP shouldn't waste its people's time on routine tasks. The more it automates its processes, the more they can focus on higher-level issues. Automated processes will alert them to problems more quickly than manual supervision. In addition, the automation of tasks with many steps, such as patching and verification, reduces the chances of skipping something important.

12. What outside services will you need to have? If you'll have to go elsewhere to cover areas outside their expertise, that's not necessarily a fatal problem. However, you need to know about it in advance and figure it into your costs. Perhaps they don't deal with acquiring workstations, or they don't handle VoIP phone systems. Having a specialist in some areas might actually be better, as long as you know it's part of the plan.

Service Quality

13. Will they help build your business strategy? The importance of this question depends on how you think of the MSP's role. If you just want them for support, skip to the next question. If you want the managed service provider to be a partner in building the IT aspects of your business, you should look into how well they've done this with other customers. Do they have success stories they can share with you?

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14. What do they do internally, and what do they outsource? Again, no one provider can do it all. It shows good sense if they outsource some tasks, but you have to be comfortable with what they share with a third party. In some cases, such as contracts which deal with classified data, the arrangement might not be acceptable. You have to consider the kinds of work you do now and may do in the future.

15. What is included in the price? This question applies if you're being quoted a flat rate or inclusive price. You need to get an itemized list in the contract, and you have to be sure you understand what each item covers. Otherwise, you could find you have gaps in your support or have to pay extra.

16. What was their biggest client-facing issue? This is a tough but fair question to throw at any provider. They should be able to talk about their biggest challenges, even if they can't name names, and discuss how they faced them. If they say they've never faced a serious challenge, they're either inexperienced or dishonest.

17. How will they improve your company's efficiency? You want more than a "break-fix" service; if that's all they do, it's not managed services. You need to know what kind of help they'll offer for long-term improvements in your technology. The MSP should anticipate and prevent problems so that you have fewer crises and less downtime.

18. How will the MSP reduce your company's workload? The right answer to this question depends on your expectations and willingness to pay for them. What tasks do you want the provider to take over? Will it be a replacement for your helpdesk? Will it provide full network maintenance, or will your in-house staff retain important responsibilities? There's no one right answer, but there's a right answer for you.

19. How will they reduce your costs? The bottom line is that results with the managed service provider should cost less than doing it unassisted. This doesn't necessarily mean spending less money. If what you pay them comes back and then some in your ROI, that's a saving. Ultimately, results are measured in money.

20. Are they able to scale? If you have big plans for growth, you need a provider that can keep up. A provider that prides itself on its small-company culture might be fine for some kinds of customers, but one that even hopes for exponential growth should look for an MSP that can deal with the challenges that will offer.

Bonus Question

21. What is their off boarding process? It's not something anyone likes to think of, but your business's needs will change, and the provider's ability to meet them may change as well. You don't want to feel locked in if you need to change to another MSP. Besides, offering a clean exit strategy is a sign of an honest business.