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hassle free IT

7 steps to choosing the right IT support company.

If you want to ensure the process is hassle free and meets the requirements of your business this guide will take you through the correct process step by step.

All SME companies these days require great IT support to be effective. Left unchecked things do go wrong and business owners need to assess how to deal with IT within their business in a cost effective way.

Read this guide and you will learn these 7 steps.

✓   Make the correct shortlist

✓   A list of **key questions to ask** potential suppliers including what answers to look for.

✓   What the **pro's and con's** are of typical different IT support offerings

✓   Why **cheap is not best** and TCO of IT support explained

✓   How to ensure that you get **what your business needs** from your IT supplier

✓   How to get **Free IT services** that help you make key business decisions

✓   How to **get maximum business advantage** from your IT company

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Identifying and contacting potential IT suppliers

Since most SME businesses do not have extensive IT expertise they should look for a single source supplier for all hardware, software, service and support. If you have to deal with multiple suppliers you will have to decide which one is responsible if there is a problem, having a single supplier removes this significant issue.

Probably overlooked by most people a stage that needs thinking about, how do you come up with your shortlist. Its not uncommon to take the path of least resistance and think of people you know or ask around for people. You need a plan this stage as much as any!

So what are the requirements for people to get on your shortlist and how do you find them?

Look for companies that meet the following requirements.

1. Strongly recommended by friends (but do avoid using friends of your own)
2. Have a relevant certification such as Microsoft's partner program or their Small business specialist qualification.
3. Look for companies that belong to groups and organisations as it will be easier to investigate their track record.
4. Having local IT support is not as vital as it used to be but is it worth looking for companies with a local presence
5. As discussed below ask anybody who has made your shortlist if they can recommend anybody else you can talk to

How can you find companies for your shortlist.

1. Obviously search for them on the internet "IT Support in *MY TOWN*" (put in where you are by town or county etc. http://www.google.com
2. Look at Yell.com http://www.yell.com/
3. Use resources from providers such as Microsoft's Pinpoint service http://pinpoint.microsoft.com/en-GB
4. Ask your networking contacts who they know that they can recommend.
5. Talk to Business Link or other trusted advisers and ask them to make recommendations.

I suggest talking to the 6 that look the best.

Make your shortlist and then contact them requesting a face to face meeting.

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A list of key questions to ask potential suppliers including what answers to look for

Once you are in the meeting you will normally be asked to explain what you currently do for IT support, why you are looking to change and what kind of service you are looking for, so be prepared for these questions.

1. **Do you have an understanding of our industry?** This one is useful, but not essential, it enables the IT company to get started quicker, but don't dismiss a great company just because they have not worked in your industry. Also beware the specialist who only works in your industry, or there is a chance you will end up doing the same as everyone else?

2. **Do you get an individual account manager assigned to your business who is directly responsible for your project management?** Essential! You need to know who is looking after you.

3. **What is their approach to systems and can they help you to implement IT systems to support, marketing, sales and customer service systems for example?** There are many IT companies out there who will install a printer, a network or a server. But what you need is 'more profit' isn't it?

4. **Are they able to provide you with IT skills training?** It is estimated that 90% of people use only 10% of the capability of the software they buy. Your IT partner needs to be able to provide you with a full IT service.

5. **How much training do their team undertake in order to keep up to date with the latest IT technology?** IT is a bit like Marketing. What you know today bears no reflection on what you need to know tomorrow. Where does this training come from is also a great question?

6. **Can you have a look at their IT systems?** Let me ask you a question. Would you go to an IT company to get a great email solution, if they can't show you how effective theirs is? Would you ask a company who had really poor CRM to offer you CRM advise? I am sure you get the message!

7. **Can you hear about results that they have delivered for others?** The proof is in the pudding! Remember we are not looking for fancy IT gismos. We are looking for results. How well did that IT system improve productivity? What did it do to morale?

8. **Can I speak to your clients?** Any company will portray itself as 'Outstanding', reality sometimes is not the same, so asking to speak to their clients is often good feedback.
   Ask these questions.
   1. Did they deliver what they promised?
   2. Where they responsive and easy to get hold of?
   3. Did they bill accurately?
   4. Did they stay within the projected budget?
   5. Would you use them again?

9. **What is their philosophy; ask them what their mission statement is?** It's an interesting question and the important thing is that it links in and is compatible with yours.

10. **What are their customer service commitments?** If they are not committed to customer services and have committed to it in writing in the form of a customer service charter, strike them off your list.

11. **Do they back up their business with clear and specific guarantees?** Guarantees are important and they need to be clear to safeguard your company and so you know what you are committing to.

12. **What systems do you operate that will ensure continuity of service (e.g. in the event of your main point of contact being incapacitated)?** If you are thinking of employing a 'one man band' IT company. What happens if they break their leg, etc, etc?

13. **Do they provide added value products free of charge?** OK not essential, but great if they do, it shows commitment to you, their client.

14. **Are they insured and if so how much is that insurance worth?** It should be at least a £1,000,000 professional indemnity package.

15. **How will they communicate with you?** Do they have a written commitment? Do you have open access during all business hours?

16. **Do they have testimonials and case studies from other satisfied customers?** Once again getting someone else's comment is very useful.

17. **Are they specialist in the size of business you are.** IT can be applied across a range of business to achieve the same aim but the implementation will vary depending on the size of the company check to see if they have experience and qualification in working with your size of company.

18. **How can you increase your business efficiency from the use of IT?** If the company can't give you at least 10 ways of doing so, strike them off!

19. **Do they have a system for monitoring your IT set-up?** A structured monitoring system that keeps you informed and assured will give you peace of mind and help you keep an eye on things as well as the IT company.

20. **Will they take time to learn about your business?** Preferably by spending time with you at annual reviews and also offer ad-hoc meeting at no extra charge to cope with business change.

21. **How comprehensive is their list of services?** Look for a happy medium between the 'jack of all trades' and the consultant who only works in one niche area, such as PC support. The best IT companies will partner with other technology companies and they will packing this by project managing everything for you. This ensures you get a full service always delivered by specialists but with a single point of contact.

22. **What do they believe makes them unique?** Watch for vague clichés like, quality, value, commitment and service. You want to hear something beginning with, "Only we can …"

23. **Do they research new software and hardware before they recommend it?** Some it companies are keen to test the latest gadgets because IT techies love new gadgets! Make sure that they are not going to test thing with your time and money. And ask them how do

they do this and what is process for testing?

24. **Can you recommend another IT company or tell me how I might be able to find another IT company to quote?** A company that will help you with finding a competitor shows a great deal of trust in your ability to assess the market and are interested in you finding the best fit for your business. If they trust you now they will in the future and you are more likely to trust them if they are this open. IT support is a trust based business and the importance of trust should not be overlooked.

By the time you have the answers to these questions you will have a much better Idea of who you are dealing with and it will allow you to compare companies that you shortlist.

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What the pro's and con's are of typical different IT support offerings

Typically in the IT support industry you will be offered support in 4 different varieties.

1. Pay as you go support.
This is as it says you call up and then you pay for what you use. Typically you will have a lower priority than contract support clients of the IT Company. The service you get will be just as high however and with modern remote support technology you will get immediate support once you reach the top of the queue. Some IT support companies do not offer this level of service and they will only engage support clients.

Pros: - You don't have to pay if you don't use the service; you are in control of your expenditure.

Cons: - You will have to wait until you reach the top of the queue. You will not review any proactive monitoring unless you request it. Your costs can be very variable and if you have a major problem the costs can become high as you are often left with no choice if your business is suffering. Typically you will not get any business development advice again unless you ask for it or if you pay for it.

2. Unlimited Telephone and Remote support
This is where you enter into a contract and you can call your support company as many times as you want and they will provide support typically by taking control of your PC or MAC or even you blackberry!

Pros: - You will typically get priority over pay as you go clients. Some of your costs will be fixed. You will get support in the first instance at no extra cost which means you can call in without worry before you get yourself in a big mess by trying a "self fix". Some level of preventative monitoring will often be included.

Cons:- You will have to pay for onsite time as an extra. Your costs can be very variable and if you have a major problem the costs can become high as you are often left with no choice if your business is suffering. Typically preventative maintenance is not included.

3. Unlimited Support with on-site and preventative maintenance

This is where you enter into a contract and you can call your support company as many times as you want and they will provide support typically by taking control of your PC or MAC or even you blackberry! They will also come on site on a regular basis to perform trouble shooting and preventative maintenance

Pros: - You will typically get priority over all other clients. Most of your costs will be fixed and in any case evened out over the year. You will get support at no extra cost which means you can call in without worry before you get yourself in a big mess by trying a "self fix". Active preventative monitoring will often be included. You will typically get review meetings and IT advice included.

Cons:- You may find that you are paying too much when you don't need much support, but this is often mitigated when you experience a serious problem or have a major upgrade and your support requirements are high again for a period it evens itself out over time.

4. Pay for then draw down support

Most companies will allow you to buy blocks of hours that you can draw down when you need them. Typically you will have a lower priority than contract support clients of the IT Company. The service you get will be just as high however and with modern remote support technology you will get immediate support once you reach the top of the queue. Some IT support companies do not offer this level of service and they will only engage support clients.

Pros: - You don't have to pay if you don't use the service; you are in control of your expenditure.

Cons: - You will have to pay upfront so it's not great for cashflow but you do protect yourself against rate rises. You will have to wait until you reach the top of the queue. You will not review any proactive monitoring unless you request it. Your costs can be very variable and if you have a major problem the costs can become high as you are often left with no choice if your business is suffering. Typically you will not get any business development advice again unless you ask for it or if you pay for it. Some schemes of this type have a time limit on you using the hours so you may lose them making it a false economy.

Why cheap is not best and TCO of IT support explained

It is no different to most things you purchase, you need to consider the total cost of your purchase over a period of time and if there are hidden costs. Another factor is that it can sometimes be difficult to establish if you are comparing like for like when choosing IT companies. You need to consider the following.

- If you are pay for an hourly rate who will fix things quickest and fix them without having to come back time and time again.

- Solid business advice will save your company money, gaining correct businesses benefit from IT will give you a return on your investment with your IT supplier.

- Correctly configured and monitored systems fail less often, so you need to evaluate who will give you a solid configuration and a leading monitoring solution.

How to ensure that you get what your business needs from your IT supplier

During the selection process you should ask for a demonstration of the proposed offering from each of the preferred suppliers. This gives you the opportunity to evaluate the system being proposed and the supplier.

Invite the potential suppliers to visit your company. Do they understand your business needs and have experience of your industry? Do you feel comfortable dealing with them?

Make sure they offer a regular strategy meeting so that you can discuss with them the needs of your business and what IT solution will meet those needs.

How to get Free IT services that help you make key business decisions

Many companies will offer you a free trail. Ask which services you can trial, most you can. Be very clear that it is a time limited trial and ensure the "contract" automatically terminates at the end of the trial period.

How to ensure you hire an experienced company that will deliver

This is a hard one as you will never really know if the company you choose will fit your needs until you actually engage but there are some things you must do to minimise your risk.

- Do follow through on references given
- If a company claims they are accredited ask them to prove it and check.
- Try to negotiate an SLA that means if you suffer loss you get compensation

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How to get maximum business advantage from your IT Company

This is straightforward. Always choose a supplier that wants to know what your business needs, be wary of talking technology before you have defined the requirement correctly and never find a technology and make it fit into your business.