IT Support

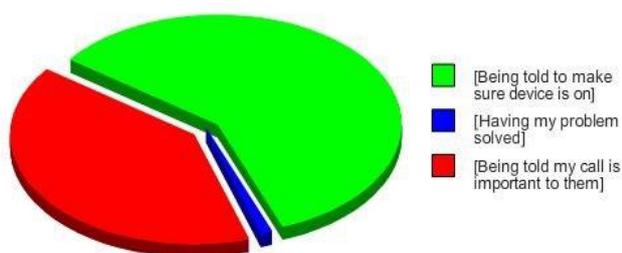## *Getting the most out of your IT supplier*

Introduction

Taking on a new IT provider (referred to as a Managed Serviced Provider or MSP for short) can happen for a number of reasons - periodic review, the need for cost savings, a breakdown in the quality of service, organizational change.

Often, the people that make the decision to change provider are not the same as the day to day users of the IT systems in a business, which can lead to oversights that end up costing you in some way. When done right, a good IT provider can lead to more flexible working practices, increased efficiency in how staff collaborate, fewer outages and a saving on IT costs.

Ethical IT has seen both good and bad outcomes over the years - and had to pick up the pieces when an outgoing MSP has not done a good job. This short paper is designed to share those experiences, to help you ask the right questions and make an informed decision about your IT support.

Time spent on phone with tech support

[Being told to make sure device is on]
[Having my problem solved]
[Being told my call is important to them]

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Considerations

The relationship with your IT provider should be a *partnership* – it must go both ways. All MSP's will fix your computer when it breaks, but few will go beyond that; fundamentally they are a reactive service not a proactive one, and will remain that way unless you engage with them. Moving from a standard supplier/customer model to a forward thinking partnership is the single most important thing you can do for your business in terms of IT, and will get the best out of your provider

Working closely with your new provider to create a simple IT Strategy, documenting where you are now and where you want to go over the next two to three years, will allow them to provide the technical input and ideas along with likely costs, giving you a roadmap you can budget for and control.

IT salesmen proudly declare they will provide an account manager and escalation points with dedicated numbers and fast response times, but have you considered how your organisation will engage with them? Engaging with your staff to ask them to provide feedback on the current IT setup will help the new provider set the scene and consider ideas they might want to discuss with you as part of regular account meetings.

We would suggest these are weekly at first – a draft agenda is below – allow at least an hour. It's as much about building up rapport as discussing individual issues. Speak to your staff, do a survey using a quick, free tool like SurveyMonkey, ask your team about what is bad with the current IT, as well as what works well for them. Present these to the account manager and ask them to go away and think about how some of the pinch points can be addressed.

Likewise, ask if your provider has ever worked with charities before and what discounts or donations you may be eligible for. Charities and social change organisations offer their own unique set of requirements and constraints; these will differ greatly from commercial companies and having experience in this area is a big advantage; if they haven't, task them with finding out – good places to start are the TT Exchange, where all charities can get free Microsoft software, and even some donated hardware too.

Regular contact is essential

- At the start of the contract it's imperative to sit down together to plot out the first 12 months. Discuss areas you would like them to explore with you, such as better remote working, faster computers, data security or "cloud computing", not just fixing things when they go wrong!
- Agree dates for the next six account meetings, and stick to a regular agenda such as:
  1. Review service levels – number of issues fixed and any patterns
  2. Discuss any problems or concerns with the service
  3. Look to future projects to improve your IT systems
- Ensure you are receiving regular reports on the issues the MSP has dealt with, and – crucially – that they take the time to talk you through these, explain any patterns and

causes in non-technical terms, and come up with suggestions on upgrades or fixes to iron these out longer term.

- Having a single person in your team that deals with the IT provider day to day helps build rapport, and that person develops a feel for the types of issues that are arising, which then feeds into your account meetings and ultimately your IT strategy to ensure continual service improvement.

- Don't forget to inform your other suppliers about the new MSP. Introduce them to one another and ensure the MSP are listed as "authorized persons" to act on your behalf if needed (for example, your internet or telephone provider, or landlord) which will save time in an emergency

- Remember that IT solutions vary enormously and people do have their own personal preferences. If the MSP's suggestions seem overly complex or expensive, consider getting a second opinion. One way to do this is posting a question to a forum such as BleepingComputer or by sending an email to the free LASA email list of IT Professionals.

Above all else, avoid the temptation of slipping into a reactive mind-set. Your IT Provider has lots of other clients, and you are also busy with your day job; it's easy to forget about one another. A good IT provider will be proactive in reaching out to you, but without regular contact, with a tight agenda and one eye firmly on constantly improving and enhancing your IT estate, you will slip into basic break/fix mode and your IT setup will stagnate.

Conclusion

It is all too easy to focus purely on cost and response time / Service Level Agreements when choosing an IT provider. These factors are of course important, but our customers have all told us that most vendors can fix faults and be reactive to a decent standard. What sets apart the best form the rest is their ability to help you extend and advance your IT setup to provide genuine value and efficiency enhancements in how your organization works. To achieve this, it may take more of your own effort than you might think, however the return you will get is well worth your time and together you can drive your IT forward as a partnership, working to an overarching strategy, with a budget and clear goals, to ensure your organisation doesn't stand still, and gives your staff an evolving set of tools to be the best they can be

Further Reading

LASA are a charity who offer advice and support in choosing a good IT Provider, developing an IT Strategy, and all manner of other information. Their free Knowledgebase is a fantastic place to start: http://www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk