Choosing the Right Computer Support Company

Choosing a computer support company does not have to feel like blindly choosing straws. Here is a list of 10 important issues to help you assess a company, complete with questions to ask a provider word-for-word. No one support company is right for everyone. Use this guide to help you find the right one for you.

1. Is the provider the right size for you?

There is no one service provider that is right for everyone. If you are a smaller business, you will never have access to the best talent of a large service provider, despite their glossy ads. If you are a large business, a small service provider will simply not be able to come through with sufficient support, despite their cheery claims.

Ask a provider: What happens when technicians go on holidays? If an assigned technician isn't sure how to best solve my problem, what's your policy for supporting him and me?

2. Can the provider help you develop your vision?

It's great to feel like you're getting results and saving money today, but you need to know a provider is thinking of the longer-term big picture and your business plans.

Ask a provider: Why do your solutions make sense for me not just now but over my next three years? In what specific ways have you factored in our potential growth and changing needs?

3. Does the provider have technical depth?

You are faced with balancing price against competency. Although highly skilled technicians cost more, they can turn a three-hour solution into a thirty-minute one. This is the benefit of their experience.

Ask a provider: How long have you been in business doing this? How long has the technician you are sending me been doing this? How many times have you implemented the technology I need?

4. Does the provider have technical breadth?

Most providers sell the one product that they know. Look for an unbiased assessment of your options from a provider with expertise in a variety of competing technologies. A provider should address not just features but also compatibility, serviceability, familiarity and training, stability, licensing, and future planned releases.

Ask a provider: Which of the three major networking technologies (Windows, Netware, and Unix) do you have expertise in? How many times have you deployed each of these technologies? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each of these technologies?

5. Is the provider diligent with the basics?

The latest and greatest technology is fun, but there are a lot of "boring" essentials that must be addressed. A good provider should raise these issues as mandatory considerations: hardware redundancy, system backup and recovery plans, preventative monitoring and realistic budgeting for maintenance.

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If a provider doesn't mention those things, try asking: Other than features and power, what are some other important considerations when deploying technology?

6. Does the provider understand your business issues?

Technology is a means to an end, that end being your thriving business. "Geeks" know computers, but you need a service provider with first-hand experience in real business issues. You need them to spell out how their solutions specifically address the pains of running your business.

Ask a provider: How does your solution help me understand my customers and improve my business? How does this technology improve the productivity of my staff? What risk does this technology introduce? How will you help me realistically plan for and manage all the costs involved?

7. Does the provider offer service agreements that foster the right relationship?

Networks and computers are not a one-shot deal—they always require lots of planning and support. The right service agreement helps develop a great relationship. Service agreements that exchange your commitment for a price break are common. Look for extras that help you with planning and logistics such as manufacturer's warranties, and software and licensing programs.

Ask a provider: Which service agreement do you recommend and why is it the best option for both of us?

8. Does the provider's service offering include Internet?

These days a business network must extend all the way to the Internet. Using more than one provider to do this means you bear the cost of coordinating these different services. One provider says they can't proceed until the other provider does something, and back and forth you go.

Ask a provider: When we need a new Internet connection or e-mail account, how many phone calls do I have to make? If I have you co-ordinate with the Internet service provider, what additional fee do I pay? Who is responsible for providing and updating my firewall, anti-virus and anti-spyware protection?

9. Can you get direct access to the service provider?

Challenge a provider on exactly how their customer service really works.

Ask a provider: When I call you, will I get a computer voice menu or will I get a human? When I call, can I deal with the same person or will I get shuffled to different departments for different issues?

10. Does the provider obviously enjoy what they do?

You need more than competency in a provider—you need them to be excited by what they do. Computer networks are fun when you truly understand their power to help you get stuff accomplished. A disinterested provider will not stay up to date on new technology and new security risks, will not care about your specifics, and will try feeding you template solutions.

Ask a provider: What motivates you to do the work you do?

Bonus: Does the provider have people you like?

Whether you want warm-fuzzies from a service provider or not, you must look forward to dealing with the people there because if you don't you won't communicate effectively and you will procrastinate addressing issues...and that eventually spells disaster. Your business is on the line. Meet with a provider face-to-face and get a feeling for their character as you ask them more than just the tough questions in this list.

Ask a provider about something other than computers!

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