CHOOSING THE RIGHT MANAGED SERVICE PROVIDER:
A SEVEN POINT CHECKLIST

Outsourcing your IT can save you money and boost your productivity, but it's important to make sure you're picking the right provider.

Sign on with a managed service provider (MSP) that can't meet your needs and you may well find that a significant percentage of your support tickets go unanswered, or that emergent problems go unresolved for hours at a time.

Obviously this situation isn't ideal, which is why we've put together this comprehensive checklist to help you spot and hire a top-notch MSP.

1. Proactive Monitoring & Maintenance

In an ideal world, your MSP will catch and resolve problems before you notice them. But this level of service is only available if you take the time to pick a provider that prioritises real-time monitoring and proactive management strategies.

Keep your eyes peeled for providers that use system-agnostic software to monitor your internal network, servers, routers, switches and firewalls. You should also look for providers that make a habit of patching your software and updating your devices to ensure business continuity.

2. Cyber Security First

A good MSP should be equipped, trained and certified to handle all of your security requirements. They should be able -- and willing -- to proactively monitor your network for security breaches, handle file and password encryption for your business, setup and manage firewalls, hunt down viruses or malware and provide on-demand security advice to members of staff.

Anything less than this and you'll end up shouldering some of the burden yourself. This isn't hugely problematic for large companies with their own technology department but it does cut into the cost and efficiency savings associated with hiring an MSP so try to pick a company that offers full security management and auditing by default.

3. Fast Response Times

Some MSPs offer guaranteed 30, 60 or 120 minute response times, while others prefer to triage tickets on an ad-hoc basis -- working out whether your issue is urgent, and passing it to a support engineer who will respond accordingly.

Both approaches work, but it's worth noting that a guaranteed response time doesn't always mean that you'll get your issue resolved within the specified

window. A lot of businesses get caught up on picking providers with a 30 minute guarantee when they'd be better served by picking a proactive MSP with a sensible approach to resource management.

Try to interrogate the exact wording of any service level agreements (SLAs), and ask prospective providers to walk you through their approach to handling emergent problems.

4. Dedicated Help Desk Facilities

It's also worth holding out for an MSP that runs a dedicated customer portal and/or high priority phone line for emergency outages, network or hardware failures, or attacks.

You can never tell when something's going to go wrong, and access to these facilities will help to ensure that you can reach a dedicated support agent without explaining your problem to multiple receptionists or waiting for a support engineer to open an email

Prospective MSPs should be willing to walk you through their support infrastructure and explain how you'd use it to reach them in an emergency. They should also explain how they classify different issues and when it would be appropriate to use their hotlines and ticketing systems.

5. 3rd Party Partnerships

A good MSP will leverage software and infrastructure from 3rd party providers like Microsoft, Cisco or Datto. The very best MSPs maintain an ongoing relationship with these 3rd party providers, allowing us to:

- Stay abreast of the latest updates and changes
- Make best use of industry-leading technologies designed to protect or improve your business
- Manage relationships and vendor payments so that you can concentrate on growing your business

When you're searching for the right MSP, try to focus on companies that are partnered with industry-leading providers like Microsoft and Cisco.

6. Friendly And Approachable Staff

It's easy to overlook the importance of good customer service, but you don't want to partner with an MSP that's hard to work with.

You're going to be interfacing with your provider on a daily or weekly basis; approaching them when things go wrong, asking them for help when members of staff make a mistake or trying to work with them to resolve complicated problems that have a profound impact on your business so you don't want to dread picking up the phone or opening a support ticket.

Spend some time chatting to the MD, support engineers and other staff before you sign on with an MSP -- paying particular attention to their manner and their response to piercing questions about the way they run their business.

7. Reasonable Pricing

Last but not least, you want to make sure that your prospective MSP is charging a price that makes sense for your business.

A lot of the bigger MSPs specialise in supplying enterprise level clients with international infrastructure, and while it may seem like a good idea to sign on with a company that specialises in this type of work, you'll end up paying much more than you need to, for a service that's not designed to meet your needs.

Conversely, smaller MSPs might not be able to provide the right level of support and expertise so try to shop around; compare different packages and pick someone that's pitching at businesses like yours.

You can see our support packages here, or get in touch to ask about our approach to providing managed IT support.