



HOW TO CHOOSE A MANAGED IT SERVICE PROVIDER (MSP)

This guide will help small and midsize businesses identify a managed IT services provider with the right combination of hard and soft skills, enabling them to maximize productivity, confidence, and employee morale with better technology.

Why The MSP Selection Process Matters

More than ever before, IT and technology are areas of strategic importance for businesses. Work from home, cloud computing, and mobile devices have each helped businesses extend their capabilities and boundaries, allowing teams to work faster and smarter than before.

However, technology management is a skillset that not all businesses can manage internally. Each part of a network, including servers and workstations, cybersecurity protections, mobile devices, and cloud computing applications, require dedication and a specialized set of skills to maintain.

Whether a business is seeking a fully managed IT service relationship or desires a co-managed solution that augments an existing IT team, there are many benefits to partnering with an IT service provider.

- Improve the stability of servers, workstations, and network endpoints
- Resolve daily IT support issues quickly so staff stay productive and engaged
- Develop strategic cybersecurity defenses and reduce the risk of infiltration
- Boost employee efficiency and morale by streamlining business processes
- Align technology with business goals to optimize IT budgets

For many businesses, finding the right IT service provider can be a confusing process because it can be difficult to differentiate between providers.

THIS GUIDE IS DESIGNED TO PROVIDE AN OBJECTIVE FRAMEWORK FOR SELECTING A MANAGED IT SERVICE PROVIDER, SO SMALL AND MIDSIZED BUSINESSES CAN ACHIEVE LONG-LASTING IT CONFIDENCE.



The Qualities of a High-Value MSP

Before you can choose the right MSP for your business, you should understand what makes an MSP valuable. There are two broad categories that you should evaluate: Hard skills including technical credentials and experience, and soft skills like communication, adaptability, and company culture.

The Technical Skills of a Quality Technology Partner

It goes without saying that a prospective technology partner should have the technology skillsets and experience to help you quickly take control of your technology, protect it from intrusion or disruption, and maintain your systems as they evolve.

LEADING TECHNICAL CERTIFICATIONS

To successfully manage and safeguard a complex network against cyberthreats requires many skillsets. When evaluating a team, determine if they have technology credentials and certifications from vendors that are relevant to your environment. Are they equally versed in the Microsoft ecosystem as they are in networking vendors like Cisco?

In addition to certifications from major hardware and software vendors, ensure that their support technicians hold certifications from CompTIA and the IT Information Library (ITIL), both of which set rigorous standards for competence.

CYBERSECURITY EXPERTISE

As hackers increase the number and sophistication of attacks, every year more small and midsize businesses realize the importance of cybersecurity preparedness. Without the benefit of an in-house cybersecurity staff, these companies rely on their IT service provider to help them develop the optimal data security defenses for their needs and budget.

The fact is that few MSPs are up to the challenge of managing comprehensive cybersecurity. It requires a specialized set of skills and a level of vigilance that most small teams cannot maintain over the long term. Here are some of the many processes that comprise a comprehensive cybersecurity offering.

- Network security monitoring to lower the chance of infiltration
- Cybersecurity audits and consulting to identify and address network vulnerability
- Hardware and software patching to quickly apply security updates as they are released
- Enterprise-grade firewall, VPN, and anti-virus management and configuration
- Regular cybersecurity awareness training for your team to keep them aware of current practices

According to research from ConnectWise,

55% OF SMALL AND MIDSIZED BUSINESSES HAVE ALREADY EXPERIENCED CYBERSECURITY INTRUSION ATTEMPT.

IMPRESSIVE IT SUPPORT AND HELP DESK METRICS

One of the few easy things about picking an IT service provider is that many aspects are easily quantified. Any prospective IT service partner should be able to share metrics for success and provide data that their service will make a positive business impact.

In the area of IT help desk, for example, there are several significant metrics that an MSP should be tracking and continuously improving.

Initial Response (IR)

How long does it take the help desk team to review and respond to a request?

First Contact Resolution (FCR)

How many support calls are resolved on the first call?

Mean Time to Resolution (MTTR)

What is the average amount of time it takes for a help desk team to resolve an issue?

Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT)

Satisfied end-users are the end goal of an IT help desk, which is why qualified MSPs use this vital metric to ensure their service is on target.

As mentioned above, the ideal help desk team will combine those hard technical skills with exceptional soft skills, like being able to explain technical problems to non-technical personnel. Other technical areas that you may wish to prioritize based on your needs include:

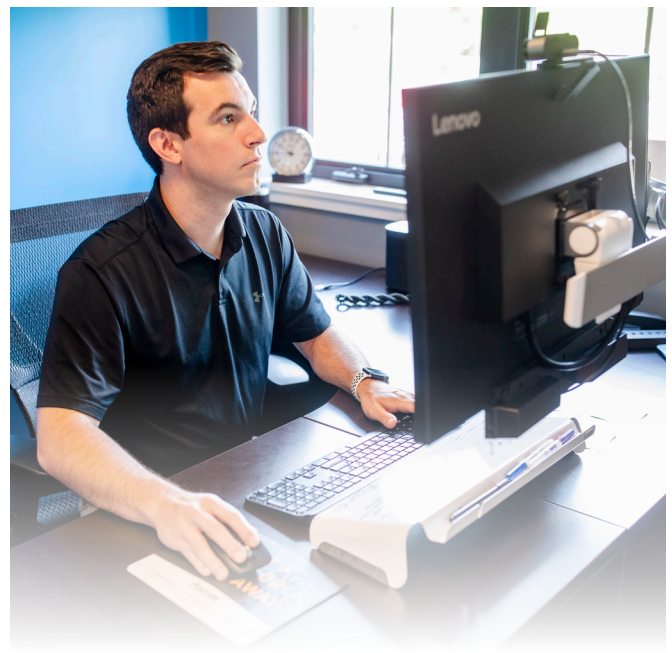
BACKUP AND DISASTER RECOVERY

With network downtime related to ransomware and natural disasters becoming a greater reality, it is vital that your business has systems and processes in place to recover operations as quickly as possible. Developing and maintaining disaster recovery systems takes planning and ongoing vigilance.

To learn more about a vendor's disaster recovery service, inquire about how they define and measure Recovery Time Objective (RTO) and Recovery Point Objective (RPO), two important disaster recovery metrics.

CLOUD COMPUTING

The cloud can have a transformative impact on your business, but only when those services are properly integrated into your on-premises systems and configured for optimal security. Any veteran MSP will have documented success in all areas of cloud computing, from migrating servers and services to the cloud and identifying infrastructure bottlenecks, to ensuring compliance and security.



The Intangible Aspects of the Successful IT Partnership

The managed IT service relationship is unique in its depth and strategic importance. Your MSP will be involved in all aspects of your technology, from daily support and maintenance to long-term strategic planning.

Because technology is now a major source of competitive advantage, picking the right MSP will provide a positive, bottom-line impact on your business for years to come. But the unique and intimate MSP relationship requires that you place the soft skills and intangible aspects of the relationship alongside hard skills and technical certifications.

What exactly do we mean?

A STRONG CULTURE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

You will be working closely with your MSP for years, so you want to make sure that you enjoy working with their team.

Do they do an excellent job at translating complex ideas into plain english? At best, techie talk is hard to follow and can be minimally helpful. At its worst, it may be a sign they are trying to distract you from critical issues or hide something.

Do they specialize in providing managed IT services, or are managed IT services a small part of a larger company? To get a great cultural match, you will want to partner with an MSP that specializes in IT monitoring, maintenance, support, and strategy.

Remember, communication is key at every stage of the MSP relationship. You should look for a provider who actively listens to your needs at every meeting, shows mutual respect, and displays confidence when addressing your technology needs. They should also offer to meet in person or virtually with regularity to discuss the current network environment and strategically plan for the future needs of your company. Is an on-site visit to their facility an option? It may be worth your time to meet the team your employees will be relying on and to see their operation. A clean, professional, and well-organized workspace often translates into clean, professional, and well-organized services.

A STRATEGIC, LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIP

MSPs can do more than keep your network healthy and stable. They also help keep your business armed with the latest technology and make sure that your IT budget is optimized for maximum business impact. Throughout the selection process, prioritize MSPs that mention consulting or virtual Chief Information Officer (vCIO) services. Having an MSP work as your vCIO benefits your business in many ways.

- Regular meetings between your decision makers and MSP senior engineers
- Develop and update an IT roadmap to plan strategic upgrades and replacements
- Provide ongoing cybersecurity insights and updates to help mitigate new threats
- Achieve or maintain HIPAA, PCI-DSS, FINRA, and other regulatory compliance

Note: The unique nature of the MSP relationship means that old tools for vendor selection, like the Request For Proposal (RFP), are not always helpful. They glaze over the qualitative aspects of the MSP relationship and tend to favor industry bottom feeders.

The MSP Search – Start Your Due Diligence Online

The Internet should provide you with plenty of basic information about the MSPs in your area. To start, run some basic searches about all the providers in your area with searches like: “managed IT services near me” or “business IT support in my area.”

These results will provide you with a list of companies that you can start to evaluate. Once you have this list, you can move on to a careful inspection of each. Here are the elements that increase the chance a company is reputable, and red flags to watch out for.

Number of Years in Business

As we mentioned above, the MSP field is home to many unreliable and untrustworthy operations that try to undercut reputable providers on price, while concealing their poor service and lack of experience behind bold marketing claims. While reviewing providers in your area, stick with vendors who have an established history in your area.

Online Reviews

A business that has earned loyalty from customers through many years of service will want to highlight those reviews online, knowing that testimonials and honest reviews are important ways of differentiating themselves from the pack.

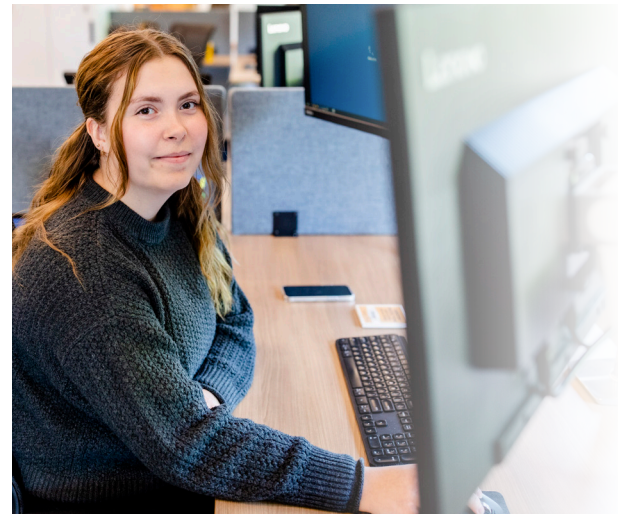
Too Small (or Too Large)

Finding the right sized MSP is an important part of selecting the correct partner. Too small and service can suffer; however, too large, and you could be just a number. Look for an in-between vendor with staff dedicated to IT support.

During the research phase, you can also start thinking about the problems that are causing you the most harm.

For example, are day-to-day technology problems (“fires”) causing you the most trouble? Or do you feel that there is a misalignment between your business goals and the IT providers experience? Do you need someone with industry specific experience to help you with a specific pain point, or gain a competitive advantage?

Also, note any vendors that make specific mention of your industry in their online marketing content. An MSP with specialized knowledge of your industry can provide insights and performance optimizations that an inexperienced MSP cannot.



The MSP Search – Managing the MSP Interview Process

Now that you have a short list of candidates, you can proceed to interviewing each of them to find the best fit. To get the most valuable information from the interview process, be as actively engaged in the talk as possible.

You should lead the conversation and let the MSP answer your questions and concerns. Here are some worthwhile areas of inquiry for interviewing a prospective MSP.

DIG INTO THEIR EXPERIENCE

Now that you have them face to face, it is time to ask them pointed questions. Do not be afraid to be blunt! An experienced MSP will be happy to answer any question about their service and talk about their work.

- **How do they** track customer satisfaction?
- **What is their** average help desk initial response time?
- **What is their** average help desk ticket resolution time?
- **How do** important IT issues get escalated through their staff?
- **How will they** improve your network defenses?
Do they offer cybersecurity training for staff?
- **Have their** clients experienced any major data breaches?
How effectively were they able to recover after the attack?
How long were they down?
- **Who will** be your primary point of contact?
What is their background and experience?
- **Do they** work with other companies in your industry?
Can they provide success cases?



INQUIRE ABOUT THEIR PRICING

One of the major benefits of the MSP model is that all your IT support, including both onsite and remote support, comes with a single, flat monthly bill based on the number of users or devices.

That stable monthly rate enables you to budget with confidence, but it also aligns your business interests with that of your provider, because the better your systems run, the less day-to-day maintenance work they must do and the more productive your employees can be.

However, some disreputable MSPs will make claims about providing flat-rate, all-inclusive support, but try to sneak hidden fees or services charges into your bill. The interview process is a terrific opportunity to clarify this.

- **How do they** price their service offering?
- **Do they** include cybersecurity services and support in their pricing?
- **Do they** include network health monitoring in their service packages?
- **Are the** on- and off-site support calls unlimited, or are there limits?
- **How do they** price project work that is outside the scope of the managed IT service arrangement?

You may also want to ask where their help desk is located. Is it in your area, or will you be speaking with an outsourced help desk team? Cost cutting measures like outsourcing will slow your help desk requests, make your team less likely to seek help for issues, and degrade overall service quality and confidence.

ESTABLISH A POSITIVE RAPPORT

The interview process is also an excellent time to determine if the MSP's team are the kind of people that you want to work with closely over the coming years. These early meetings are a fantastic way for you to learn about each other's business and start your relationship on a positive note, providing years of mutual benefit.



Astute Technology Management is a managed IT service provider and cybersecurity services firm that serves business throughout Ohio.

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