15 Critical Questions to Ask a Managed Services Provider

Choosing a Managed Service Provider (MSP) is one of the most important business decisions you will make. The right partner can make a tremendous difference on your efficiency and bottom line. The wrong partner, however, can quickly become a money pit, draining your budget and the time of your staff.

Review the questions below to avoid the costly mistake of hiring the wrong MSP. The following insights come from our 15+ years of providing IT support for hundreds of small to mid-sized businesses.

1. **Do their calls get answered by a live person?**

   A competent IT provider will provide multiple ways to get in touch with them, including a phone number for their help desk that gets answered to by a live person during business hours. Beware of any companies that put too much emphasis on email, chat or contact forms to get in touch. While these are great ways to communicate low-priority issues, your business should be able to contact a live person if needed.

2. **Do they offer onsite or after-hours support in the event of an emergency?**

   It's wise to choose an MSP that offers both remote and onsite support. While most issues can be resolved remotely, there is a tremendous - and often underappreciated - value to speaking with them in person. Often, technicians will discover problems or get asked questions from clients that they would not have thought to call in. You also need a team that is prepared to put all boots on the ground in the event of an emergency.

3. **Do they have written guidelines for response times?**

   One of the most common complaints we get from new clients is about the slow response times of their previous provider. There are a number of reasons for slow response times, including staffing levels, ability to track open issues, or lack of systems or processes. Regardless, you should not have to be burdened by their inability to communicate properly.

   Some MSPs are willing to engage in a Service Level Agreement (SLA), whereas the response times are formally defined within the scope of your agreement. This typically comes with a premium that you may or may not be willing to pay for. Either way, be sure they at least have internal guidelines for escalating and responding to issues.

4. **Do they remotely monitor your network and provide proactive maintenance?**

    By definition, the primary responsibility of an MSP is to monitor your IT environment and provide [proactive maintenance](#) to keep it running smoothly. The key word here is *proactive*. They do this by installing monitoring systems that operate 24x7x365, collecting and evaluating performance statistics such as memory usage, CPU usage and disk space from your servers, PCs, and networking components. If something seems 'out of whack,' the MSP can fix the issue before it escalates into something more serious. So most of the issues are resolved before you even know about them. All of this translates to less downtime, longer life-span for your equipment, and a lower burden on your staff.

5. **Do they have Errors and Omissions (E&O) insurance?**

    If one of their technicians makes a mistake or a judgment error, causing data loss or massive downtime, who's responsible? Any reputable MSP should be able to provide proof of E&O insurance, which provides coverage in the event that an error or omission on their part has caused financial loss.

6. **Can they provide you with network documentation including all hardware devices, warranties, software licenses, passwords, and user information?**

    As a business, it's important to maintain documentation and access everything you own, even if access to the information is limited to key people. Some IT providers are unwilling to provide even basic information like this to their clients, as it gives them more control or job security. Your IT provider should provide you with a complete inventory on an ongoing basis.

7. **Can they provide support for your unique line of business applications?**

    While most MSP's claim they 'specialize' in a specific industry, most do not. In fact, they're probably making the same recommendations and providing the same type of service to a dental office as they are the manufacturing firm down the street.

    An MSP that truly specializes in your industry will genuinely understand how your business operates, what day-to-day challenges you face, and how your business structure and workflow impacts your bottom line.

8. **Is Managed Services their primary business function?**

    A lot of companies provide some flavor of Managed Services, but their primary business function is actually something else, such as a printer and copier company, a marketing agency, or an accounting firm. A true MSP will have a team of technicians, dedicated monitoring systems and detailed procedures and protocols dedicated primarily to delivering managed IT services.

9. **Do they offer a true "all-inclusive" support plan? Do they clearly define any and all services that are considered out-of-scope of their agreement?**

    One of the more popular Managed Services options is the all-you-can-eat plan. Generally, this plan works out to the benefit of both parties. With hourly support plans, the main goal of the MSP is to maximize billable hours, which directly contrasts with the goals of the client. In an

all-inclusive or flat-fee arrangement, the MSP is motivated to perform their work quickly AND accurately to ensure problems don't pop backup.

When opting for an all-inclusive plan, make sure you are fully aware of what is and is not included. Some items that may or may not be included are:

- *Onsite support*
- *After hours support for non-emergency issues*
- *Spyware, malware and virus infection management*
- *Backup management*
- *Internet and data connectivity*
- *3rd party software support*
- *Support for hardware or software not sourced by the MSP*
- *Support for a major disaster, such as a network restore*
- *Personal PCs and laptops that are used to access company data*
- *Mobile devices*
- *Infrastructure upgrades*
- *PC replacement*
- *Data migrations / conversions*
- *Cabling*
- *Office moves / relocation*

10. Do they provide regular reporting on the health of your IT environment?

The ability to plan ahead and budget for future IT expenditures is one of the most important benefits you'll get from a managed services program. A reputable MSP will make sure you are well aware of possible failures and upcoming purchases. One of the ways this is communicated is through monthly reporting. You should receive reports detailing the performance of your systems, all work performed over the month, and recommendations for improvement.

[Here's an example of a Monthly System Health Report](#)

11. Do they verify that good backups are being performed daily, weekly and monthly?

We've been called in to too many situations where a business suffers a major server crash or outage and is desperately trying to restore their data, only to find out that the last good backup was taken months, or even years ago. A reputable technician should confirm that your firm is backing up your data daily, weekly and monthly. This simple task can save you tens of thousands of dollars in data loss, equipment damage and repair services down the road.

12. Do they regularly install patches and updates?

One of the greatest sources of vulnerabilities in most small and midsized businesses comes from system that are not routinely updated with the latest software patches. Most cyber-attacks happen by exploiting these unpatched systems. Your MSP, at a minimum, should be applying monthly Windows updates and daily antivirus definition files to all devices.

13. Are they willing to provide client references?

Don't be afraid to ask [client references](#). Your MSP should be able to send you some clients that are in the same industry or similar size to your company.

Questions to ask include:

- *What's your satisfaction with the amount of time it takes to respond to issues?*
- *What's your satisfaction with the amount of time it takes to resolve your issues?*
- *What's your satisfaction with the professionalism and knowledge of the technicians?*
- *Do they provide detailed invoices?*
- *Would you recommend the company? Why?*

14. Do they provide detailed notes on all activities performed on your network?

Have you ever gotten an invoice from your mechanic or repairman that you can barely understand? Or have you ever paid for a recurring service from a company that you haven't heard from in months? Your MSP should be performing updates and regular preventative maintenance activities, accompanied by detailed notes or reporting the clearly explain what work was done and why. These notes should be included on your monthly invoice, customer portal, or service reports. [You should not have to question what you're paying for](#).

15. Do they have qualifications and/or vendor certifications?

A reputable IT company should have a handful of people on staff with various certifications, which may include any of the following: Microsoft Certified Solutions Associate (MCSA), Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE), or Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA). The company should also have vendor partnerships with vendors such as Microsoft, Dell, HP, or Cisco.

Accellis Technology Group is committed to helping small and mid-sized businesses streamline the flow of information, improve productivity and maximize security. If you want a Managed Service Provider to help keep your network running smoothly and efficiently, our team gets the job done better than anyone. To learn more, please [call us today](#).