How to Choose the Right Managed Service Provider (MSP)

A guide to ensure your next MSP...
...is also your last.

Ripple

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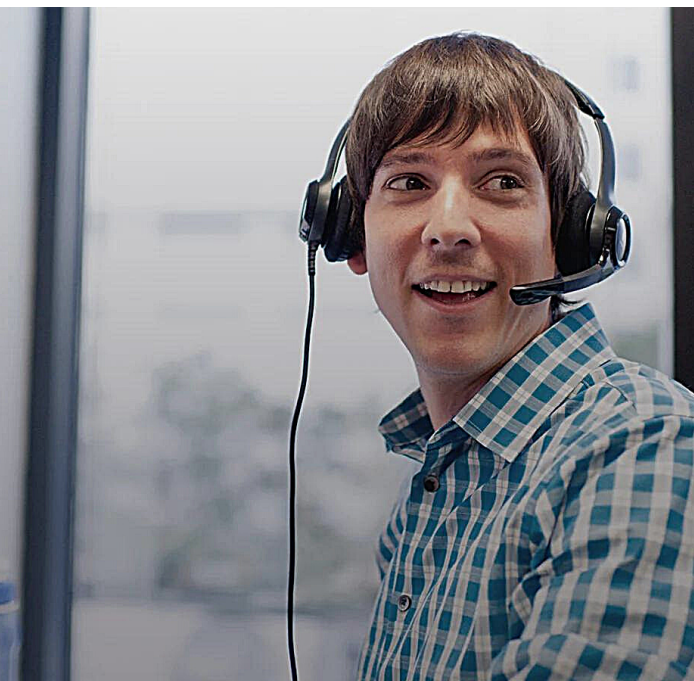# So, you are looking for a new managed IT partner.

Take a deep breath.

Change is hard but manageable—if you follow this easy-to-use grader.

Before we dive into the questions to ask prospective MSPs there is one thing you and your team must do...

Decide what you value the most in your next IT relationship.

There are many different maturity levels of MSPs ranging from a break-fix shop to a fully functional IT extension of your business.

On the next page, you will find the broad categories – we suggest ranking them in order of importance BEFORE starting to talk with MSPs.

Your Rank	Category	Question
	Support	How does slow/poor support impact your team and organization? Can you put a number or value to this impact?
	Execution	Does inconsistent IT execution hurt your organization enough that you would be willing to pay more for consistency?
	Strategy	Are you growing quickly or have critical security needs? If so what would it cost you if IT either doesn't keep up or there are IT missteps?
	Security	Have you identified what needs to be secured in your org? This is an area where MSPs throw around a lot of jargon and industry nonsense. Having a clear idea of what a security failure could mean to your business is critical.
	Philosophy	Really this boils down to: • Simplicity vs complexity • Helping your business vs fixing your computers Philosophy is a qualitative area but you will hear it as you chat with prospective MSPs.

Great job!

Now that you understand what you value and ultimately will pay for...

...it is time to get started with the interview!

On the following pages, you will find questions grouped by each category from above. These questions will help you determine where a potential MSP lands in each category and you can use that to determine if their offering matches what you value.

Support

Do you have a team dedicated solely to IT support? (e.g. a team that is not juggling their priorities between support, project management, etc.)

Why does this matter? - Consistency of support experience.

Most MSPs use project people for support and support people for projects. This is great for the MSP as it helps to keep costs down. However, consistent execution in either support or projects can become difficult because every time project work picks up, support suffers and vice versa. The key to getting a consistent experience is having dedicated resources.

How do you get feedback about the support you provide us?

Why does this matter? - IT keeping up with your business

Feedback is essential for the way you are being supported to keep up with your business. A commitment to listening and adjusting to client needs is something that separates an average MSP from one that can really help your business succeed.

Who do we contact in the event of a support related issue?

Why does this matter? - No one is perfect. Issue resolution can make or break the relationship

Even the most consistent support experience will have bumps in the road, so it's important that your MSP has a well-defined process for handling issues when they arise. You should be provided with a clear line of communication to the entire team, not just the primary tech contact or the owner. Additionally, there should be a scheduled check-in on the remediation and an opportunity to address any follow-ups.

Who handles the majority of your support requests?

Why does this matter? - Service continuity and consistency

When it comes to delivering a consistent support experience, having a team at your disposal is key. In the short term, a single contact can seem like a great solution but when that person is out sick, gets busy with another client, goes on vacation, or leaves, your support experience suffers. Remember you are hiring a managed services company, not an individual. Make sure your MSP gets multiple people involved in supporting you.

Execution

Do you have a dedicated project team (generally people not also responsible for day to day support)?

Why does this matter? - Consistency of project delivery

Most MSPs use project people for support and support people for projects. This is great for the MSP as it helps to keep costs down. However, consistent execution in either support or projects becomes very difficult. Every time project work picks up, support suffers and vice versa. The key to getting a consistent experience is having dedicated resources.

Do you have a dedicated project manager to coordinate and drive projects?

Why does this matter? - Communication and hitting deadlines

A dedicated project manager is invaluable when doing a project with your MSP. Sometimes executives/owners at a company will help drive projects, which is better than leaving it to the project technical lead but not as effective as a dedicated project manager. Want to maximize your next IT project's chances of success? Make sure to find an IT partner with a dedicated project manager.

When there is a project ongoing will we have weekly, scheduled check-in calls with the project manager?

Why does this matter? - Consistency and maturity

Some of the most brilliant technical people are poor planners. Why? Most of them are so smart they gloss over critical details along the way. This can have a terrible impact on the client experience when it comes to projects. Scheduled communication is a great way to ensure that the tech folks on your project think about the project when they are not in the middle of doing a task in it. This process allows them to catch some of the details that could fall through the cracks and cause problems later.

Do you provide user education (webinars, videos, written materials) as part of a project?

Why does this matter? - Making change easier for your users is critical to a project being successful

Tools are ineffective unless people know about the tool and how to use it. This is why education is so important. Making sure your team members are trained to utilize the tools at their disposal, early and often, will increase the likelihood that people actually use the tools.

Strategy

Do you meet with us at least yearly to discuss the business (beyond just upgrading our computers)?

Why does this matter? – IT can add more value to your business

It's not possible to effectively develop an IT strategy without understanding your business or organization. Sometimes the default for an MSP is to sell you more tools in their stack in lieu of building a proper strategy. Beware of the tools and solutions that don't add value to your business.

OBSERVATION – As the MSP talked about their service note whether they focus on features or business outcomes.

Why does this matter? – Features don't create outcomes – especially in IT

Good IT strategy means the solutions offered provide value to your business. Full stop. And remember, the features of a product do not always equate to value. If your MSP cannot articulate that properly, it should give you pause.

Security

What security solutions are included in your monthly service?

Why does this matter? - Hidden costs to protect what you need to be protected.

Since you have an idea of what you need to secure from the initial ranking exercise listen to what the MSP describes. Security must be more holistic than just antivirus and a firewall at the office. In addition the majority of it should be included in the offering and cover your needs.

How do you enable a flexible workforce?

Why does this matter? - Ease of use

Remote work is a reality. The office firewall and other office-based security measures no longer protect your team. Security that is simple to use and follows your team members is key. Your MSP should understand this reality and have adjusted their service offering to account for it.

If you hear...
- **VPN - Is that always on or does it require a user to connect?**
- **Antivirus - Is it signature-based or behaviour-based (AI)?**
- **Web filtering or DNS protection - is that in and out of the office?**
- **Intrusion Prevention (IPS) - is that on a per host basis or only on the office network?**

Does your include security training that educates and tests our users regularly to help prevent phishing and other attacks?

Why does this matter? - Users are the biggest security risk

In every IT security scenario, humans are often the weakest link. This is why security education is as critical as endpoint protection. Your MSP should be educating and testing your team on a regular basis. In addition, they should be keeping everyone up to date on the latest trends and risks.

Philosophy

Do you have regularly scheduled check-ins with us even if nothing is broken or needs to be upgraded?

Why does this matter? - Enabling your business

It is very hard for an IT partner to be effective if they don't understand where your business is and where it's going. Discussions centered around strategy instead of support issues are very important for them to be plugged into what's going on.

What are your typical contract terms?

Why does this matter? - Simplicity and enabling your business

Long-term contracts make it easy for your MSP to onboard your organization and then fall back into maintenance mode for the remainder of the contract. A certain 36-month revenue stream rewards minimizing time spent per client to maximize profitability and a long-term contract allows them to do just that without worrying about losing the business for the term of the contract. Month-to-month or an easy 60-day out of any contracts show an MSPs commitment to earning your business daily.

Is your current MSP leaving you wondering?

That feeling of being left in the dark is something we hear from frustrated business owners and office managers every day.

Get Answers »

Discover for yourself the Humans First Managed IT experience that will change your relationship with office technology...forever.