NINE

9 Things to Look for in an IT Provider

Matthew Buechler

If you feel it is not quite as easy as it should be to find a quality outsourced Information Technology (IT) provider, then you are not alone. Tens of thousands of businesses across America are struggling with this same issue right now. They all want technology to work the way they imagined it would when they bought it, including occasional advice and consultation, but finding the right team is not as easy as going online and looking for the closest IT firm.

IT providers have unique philosophies, skill sets, and certifications. Also, business owners and technology professionals barely speak the same language – you want to talk profits, not bandwidth and gigabytes – so it is no surprise there is much confusion.

Despite these challenges, however, it is important to your company's long-term profitability that you find the right IT provider. Even the smallest business needs assorted hardware and software applications to handle day-to-day operations, including e-mail, billing, CRM, and so on. Without the proper IT support, your company could quickly grind to a halt.

Trying to manage technology yourself, or having one of your employees do it, can be almost as bad. Remember, every minute spent dealing with computer or communication issues that you are not trained or equipped to handle can slow the business down and takes you away from another task that is just as important.

For these reasons, and because having the right technology can make your company faster, more efficient, and more profitable, you should be focused on finding not just a good IT provider, but one that is the right fit for your business and your particular situation. Here are nine things to look for:

A HIGHLY TRAINED STAFF

You do not want just anyone working on your hardware and software when your company's future is on the line. At a minimum, you want a trained staff that is certified in the hardware and software that your business relies on. Take the time to be sure any potential IT provider's team is familiar with your specific technology and the industry you are in. The better understanding they have of your company's working environment, the easier it is going to be for them to help you meet your goals.

THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

Most business owners are not technology experts and do not always understand that each company has its own technology profile. No two companies are exactly the same. Just as two identical cars will eventually have different maintenance needs because of different usage, your hardware and software will become unique over time. It is important to choose an IT provider who is willing to take the time to get to know your company's technology and business goals, rather than simply attempting to fix problems as they pop up.

EXPERIENCE

One of the ironies of the IT industry is that sometimes the best technology support can actually be less expensive than the worst technology support. Why? Because the professionals who have the most experience often take less time to deal with the issues you face, so you have fewer billable hours. Also, when you work with a more experienced professional, there is less chance your business will be offline longer than needed. Inexperienced providers can sometimes make things worse.

CLEAR BILLING POLICIES

One of the most common complaints that businesses have about unreliable IT providers is that they never seem to know what they are going to be paying from month to month... much less what they will receive in return for their investment. And who can blame them? It is never good to have a vendor who seems to make things up as they go along, or to pay for services you do not need.

At Midwest PROTECH, we are fans of hourly billing – with no ongoing contracts or minimums – so our clients know exactly what they are getting for their money. We recommend that you look for the same type of arrangement or, at a minimum, one that spells out exactly what, and when, you will be charged for outsourced IT support.

FLEXIBLE AGREEMENTS

Why get locked into a long-term contract when you do not need one? A great IT company is going to be willing to let their work speak for itself on an ongoing basis, rather than keep you tied into an agreement. The best technology firms are not going to require any kind of written agreement that ties you into paying them if you no longer want to use their services. And on the other side of the coin, you will want to have the flexibility to add systems, coverage, and capabilities if you find that your business is growing and your technology needs have expanded.

REMOTE SUPPORT CAPABILITY

You do not always need, or want, someone to come to your office to get your technology working again. When you only have a minor issue, having an IT professional nearby can be a distraction, not to mention costly. Fortunately, many IT providers are now equipped with remote support capability that allows them to log into your servers, software applications, and computer systems (with your consent) from their own facilities. By giving them the capability to deal with minor issues without visiting your business, you can save lots of time and money over the course of a year.

FAST RESPONSE TIMES

An IT provider's number one priority should be to provide quick response time to get your hardware, software, and communication tools up and running again when they are not. A failure in one of these areas can leave you unable to accept orders or payments, or create a situation where you are paying employees to do nothing while they wait for your technology problems to be resolved. Often, these "hidden costs" can amount to a lot more than the price of repairing or replacing anything in your office.

You cannot afford to have your technology stop working, and a great IT team will not just be on the scene quickly, but will have you up and running again in the shortest amount of time possible. Make sure that 24-hour access and fast emergency response are included in any IT provider service agreement, because they will be critical if you ever need them.

MANY SATISFIED CUSTOMERS

Be very, very wary of an IT team that cannot point you toward a handful of men and women who are willing to say good things about the work they do. They should be able to give you the names and phone numbers of at least three or four other business owners in your area that can vouch for them. An inability to supply these references likely tells you that they are just getting off the ground, or that previous clients have not felt like they were getting the right kind of service and value. In either case, trusting them with your company's technology could be a bigger gamble than you really want to take.

A WIDE RANGE OF SPECIALTIES

While having a committed IT provider that installs, maintains, and configures your software and computer systems is an important objective, it helps if they have a team with other skills as well. In particular, specialists who can actually repair internal hardware itself, such as broken laptop LCD panels, chipset overheating issues, etc. Not only will you save money by not having to turn to expensive vendors when you have a particularly complex problem, but having a single IT team that can tackle all kinds of issues makes solving problems a lot faster and easier.

There are a lot of things that fall outside of "traditional IT" that can still be tremendously beneficial to your business. Make a point to ask about them, and see if your IT provider can offer skills or expertise that go beyond the norm.

The sheer number of outsourced IT providers that are available in any major metropolitan area, combined with the complexity of today's hardware and software systems, can make choosing the right technology quite a challenge. Even if you do not know exactly what you are looking for from a technical standpoint, if you keep in mind these nine key skills and qualities, you can help ensure that you will partner with a team that is not only right for your company's technology, but also for its future.

The best IT providers are the ones that combine the right skills with a commitment to developing a partnership with you and your business. Do not stop looking until you find one that meets the profile.

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Matthew Buechler is a founder and Senior Technician at Midwest PROTECH. Involved in computers and programming since the early 1980s, he began the company with partner Rodney Johnson in 2007.

Since that time, Midwest PROTECH has grown to serve hundreds of clients throughout the greater Cincinnati area, including a large number of small businesses as well as professionals. By combining technical insight with personal, one-on-one customer service, the company strives to offer unmatched value for every client.

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