

THE CEO AND BUSINESS OWNER'S GUIDE TO HIRING RELIABLE TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT

9 Crucial Questions To Ask Your Current or Future Provider

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1. Do you offer remote support? This day and age many (if not most) every day IT problems can be handled remotely. This is much more efficient because it involves much less interruption to your business AND the response time is drastically shortened since you don't have to wait for the technician to drive to your office.

2. Do you have a guaranteed response time? If you are on any type of service plan with an IT provider, they should be giving you SOME form of a response time guarantee. The last numbers I saw suggested an industry average for response times of four hours or more. But you can (and should) expect lower. For instance ComputerCare offers an emergency response time of less than 60 minutes.

3. What are your credentials and experience?

While you don't have to have a specific degree or certification to work on a business computer, there are still industry standards to look for. At an *absolute minimum*, you want someone with an A+ or Network+ certification working on your business systems, but this level technician is NOT qualified to work on higher level tasks without supervision. Hire someone who has demonstrated a commitment to the field by actually taking the effort to get appropriate training and only work with a company that requires their technicians to maintain industry certifications and receive ongoing training.

4. Is your help desk in-house, US based, or outsourced overseas?

Working with a company that provides help desk support can be extremely effective in reducing downtime by providing you and your staff with quick phone response to common computer and network issues. But make sure before you sign on any dotted line that you will feel comfortable working with their services. See if they will let you take them for a test run. Call into question any company that won't let you try out a support call or two. Often companies will outsource their entire help desk overseas and your staff may have a difficult time understanding the technicians. I recommend shooting for a company that handles their help desk in house during business hours. Outsourcing (after hours only) to a US based company is acceptable every day sorts of issues, but be sure you also have access to local staff after hours in case of emergencies which brings me to question 5.

5. How do you handle after-hours emergencies?

Business after-hours needs can vary greatly. If you are signing up for an all-inclusive service plan commitment, be sure there are at least a block of hours available to you for emergency support. Ideally it will be built into your plan and be unlimited, but if you are not utilizing your IT provider's fully managed solution (they do offer one right?), then at least insist on access to a technician in case of an emergency after hours.

6. What will you do when something goes wrong with my phone systems, internet, printers, etc? Hint:

"That's not really our area" is NOT an acceptable answer for a company providing services to businesses. I've heard many stories from clients whose past IT providers have left them hanging when it comes to issues with another vendor. Passing the buck can be a common problem. You'll have to call your "software, telecom, internet provider." Chose a company that is willing to be your single point of contact for all things technology related and is willing to liaise for you with these other companies when you need it. This is especially important when it comes to your unique line of business applications which paves the way for question 7...

7. Can you help me with my business applications and software?

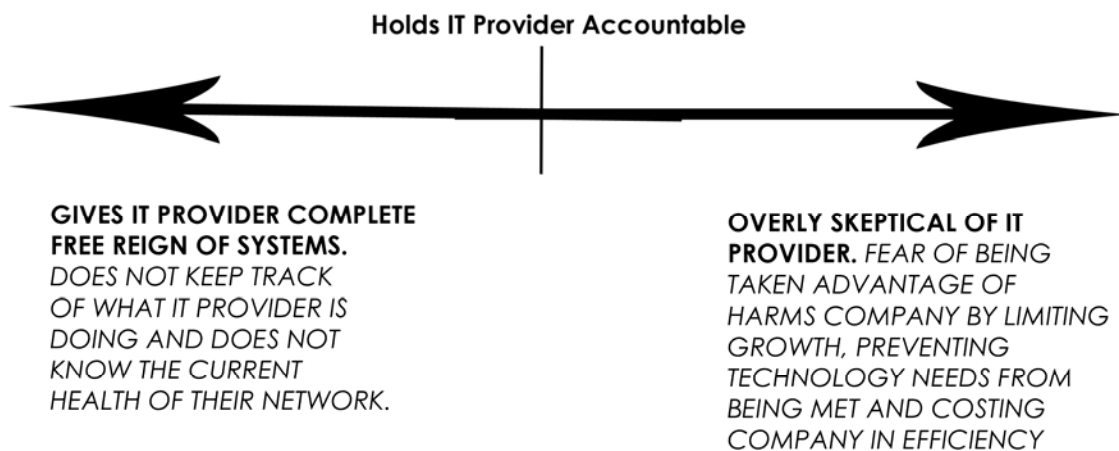
Ask any IT provider you talk with about applications specific to your business. While they will not be able to fix broken software, at a minimum they should be willing to liaise with your provider when necessary to resolve issues that occur without leaving you stuck in the middle.

8. What can you do to help me prevent problems from happening?

Again, here is a sure fire way to tell if your provider is living in the dark ages. Your IT provider should offer prevention services such as physical cleanings of your computers and servers, management and updates of your antivirus software (please make sure you have some), installation of any critical software patches, operating system patches, etc. Doesn't it make sense to work with companies that help you PREVENT problems before they happen, rather than making money when your systems break? The beauty about preventative services such as these is that many can be performed without even asking you to get up from your desk!

Hiring a provider that utilizes preventative tools will help you reduce your downtime by reducing failures, allow you to utilize your employees for what they were hired for rather than trying to fix computer problems that are not within their area of expertise, and help you to reduce overall overhead costs.

9. How can I hold you accountable? I often see two common errors among CEOs and managers in this area. Because IT can be such an enigma for people, business owners are often left not knowing what is going on with their networks. So they make the mistake of erring on one or the other side of the following continuum.



CEOs might give their IT provider free-reign because they do not understand the technology and their provider does not explain things in plain English. This puts the business at risk for obvious reasons. Too many times I've seen a server or network "held hostage" by an old IT provider because the CEO doesn't have the password! On the flip side of that, CEOs and managers become jaded, causing them to not implement new technology or modes of service (like remote support). This places their company at a significant disadvantage and costs them much more in overhead and lost opportunity.

The answer? Hold your IT provider accountable. It's unrealistic for a CEO to know everything about their networks and computer systems. But you don't have to blindly trust that your IT provider is doing what they should, or refuse to embrace changes in technology.

- Insist on regular meetings (at a minimum once a year), but preferably quarterly or monthly, where they can report on the status of your networks, and any foreseeable changes or upgrades that will be needed.
- Opt in for monthly reports of the health and status of your network. These will help you stay on top of your overall network performance. Have questions about the report? Your IT provider should be more than willing to explain anything you don't understand.
- Make sure you have all your crucial administrator passwords. While your service provider won't want to hand these passwords out wily nilly, they should have no problem giving you and possibly a small list of other contacts you designate, access to this information. After all, if your IT provider goes out of business tomorrow, how will you get into your server? You are completely justified for demanding access to this information.

The bottom line when it comes to technology consultants and service providers is that, just like in every other aspect of your business, you are completely justified in demanding excellence in quality and customer service. Don't settle for less. I hope you've found this guide beneficial. Please don't hesitate to provide your feedback!

For more information about how ComputerCare handles all of these issues, visit computercarellc.com, or call us for a free consultation at **352.378.8433**