

Top 10 Things your IT Provider Won't Tell You

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In the comedy, "Liar, Liar," Jim Carrey plays Fletcher Reede, an attorney cursed with the inability to lie, which also seems to compel him to be brutally honest. The curse leads him to destroy some relationships while restoring his integrity.

Many outsourced IT support vendors make compelling claims about their expertise, personnel capacity, responsiveness, and trustworthiness, while they simultaneously offer extremely attractive (read: cheap) pricing models.

Is it too good to be true? Probably. While I'm not Fletcher Reede, I can tell you what many support vendors would say if they were similarly cursed. Knowing what most IT support vendors are really thinking can prevent you from making a decision based on deception or half-truth, saving you the risk of having your company's integrity compromised.

If they were to be completely transparent, here's what most IT support providers would say.

1. "Our invoice-by-the-hour policy puts you and us on different teams and leaves us little incentive to be proactive."

Entering a pay-as-you-go agreement with your IT service provider makes little sense. With hourly agreements, your provider has no incentive to address the root causes of daily computer challenges.

After all, if the root causes are addressed, the provider won't be able to generate as many billable hours. Your employees won't be as likely to call attention to a productivity-sapping issues for fear of creating a large bill for your company, choosing instead to live with the challenge while frustration grows.

Choose a provider that takes complete accountability for your IT systems for a fixed, monthly fee. This will eliminate frustrations with unexpectedly large bills, give you a simple amount to budget for, and put you and the provider on the same team with the same goal of reducing the amount of problems your company has, so you can both maximize your profitability. If a vendor can't give you a fixed monthly price that includes nearly everything, it isn't really "managed services".

2. “You may end up paying much more than our ‘initial low monthly fee.’”

It can be very tempting to go with the low monthly amounts offered by many providers that offer a block of five hours a month for a fixed fee, with everything else billed by the hour after that.

But, be aware, you likely will pay more under this type of arrangement, especially if a major issue is encountered. This type of billing arrangement still omits the incentive to be proactive and may result in additional billable hours, leaving you with a larger bill than you signed up for.

A true managed service provider will offer you a single fixed amount, no matter what comes up. I have seen, over and over, when a customer truly reviews all invoices from their IT provider, they have been shocked to see the amounts paid are double or triple the amount they thought they were signed up for, due to overages.

3. “If your engineer isn’t available when you call, you and your problem will wait until he is.”

Most IT companies are either so small they only have a couple of engineers, or they are structured in a way that they assign a specific engineer to your account. This can work well at times, but if you call with a problem, even a major one, you may need to wait if your engineer is assisting another customer, occasionally for days at a time.

Also, your IT engineer is human and will take vacations (or call out sick) from time to time.

4. “If your engineer resigns, you’ll go back to square one.”

Your IT engineer will spend a lot of time getting familiar with your business, your computer system, your business software, and your staff. Sometimes it can take years for this knowledge to be fully gained.

The IT industry is notorious for its high turnover. When your engineer moves on to greener pastures, you may go back to square one with a new, unproven engineer assigned to your account.

Consider instead a company that has a *team* responsible for your IT systems with *multiple engineers* possessing various skill sets, so that no matter what the problem is, they can help. You won’t need to wait until your engineer is available to have your problem solved, or be in the position of re-orienting yet another new engineer to your company and your IT network.

5. “We have a remote monitoring system, but nobody is paying attention.”

Remote monitoring software has become *de rigueur* in the managed IT services industry lately. But the software does absolutely no good if nobody is watching the system and responding to the problems identified by the software.

A common complaint, especially from customers who have a single engineer assigned to their account, is that this engineer is also responsible for taking care of any problems the software detects. If the engineer is working another account, the alerted issues typically never get addressed.

Look for an IT provider that has a dedicated Network Operations Center (NOC) with IT professionals dedicated to quickly responding to these types of alerts.

6. “Your computer network is our training ground.”

The IT industry is one of the fastest-changing industries imaginable. It is becoming nearly impossible for a single person to be well versed in all the technologies that even a small business may deploy.

Be wary of very small companies and look instead for an organization with a deep breadth of skill sets as well as one that invests heavily in training for its staff to ensure they stay competitive with your changing needs.

7. “Your backups? They might work when you need them.”

“Set it and forget it” applies only to rotisserie grills sold on late night TV. Backup failures are all too common, and the backup process should be checked regularly by your IT provider, if not daily.

The problem is, there is generally little incentive to check these systems after the initial setup, and when there is, other more pressing issues can often crowd them out.

Demand your IT company have a process in place for regularly checking and testing your backup systems. Your business may ultimately rely on this.

8. “Issues with your third-party software are not our problem.”

All businesses run on software. Every industry has specialized software in use, from tax return software at an accounting firm, dispatch software at a trucking business, to insurance quoting software at an insurance agency. If this software is not working properly, then the business

stops. So why do many IT providers simply throw up their hands and tell you to “Call the software vendor?”

Dealing with third party software is often the biggest time expenditure of these firms, so many simply refuse to deal with this class of problem, leaving you to deal with it on your own. Even worse, a common answer from the software vendor may be, “It’s your hardware, not us”, leaving you in the middle with no idea what to do next.

As you evaluate IT support, look closely at what level of involvement your prospective IT provider will play in helping resolve issues with third-party software. They should be willing to directly engage the third party vendor so you as a business owner remain out of the middle.

9. “We can’t really do everything we say we do.”

Beware the Jack-Of-All-Trades, Master of None syndrome. There are IT companies in the market that claim to do everything from the computer networking, data cabling, electrical work, phone systems, custom software programming, web design, and maybe even promise to feed the cat. IT companies cannot do everything and do it well.

These different areas have become increasingly specialized lately and it often can be better to select companies that compete and are a leader in their niche and in that niche only.

Look for a core focus on network and hardware support. Support calls for a completely different discipline and methodology than design and development of custom software, web sites, or unique devices. Business-class IT support calls for a depth of infrastructure and personnel that most small consultancies lack.

10. “We can’t manage our growth.”

Many smaller IT shops are run by techies who happened to make a career or a business out of their hobby. These small shops often do a decent job – for a while.

After they grow to a certain size, their service often suffers because they do not possess the business acumen to put the processes in place for scalability.

As you evaluate, take a close look at each company to ensure they possess not only the ability and depth to solve your IT problems, but also the business skill necessary to run an effective company as they grow.

Contact Harland Technology Services to inquire about technology support for your business. We offer nationwide local support for small, medium and enterprise organizations in virtually all industries. Visit www.harlandts.com.