



# 10 Golden Questions For Choosing Your New IT Support Provider

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A report on how to choose a reliable, competent and stress-free IT support company (November 2011).

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## Are You Unhappy With Your Current IT Support Provider?

Does your current IT support provider:

- Take too long to respond to your requests?
- Promise to call you back and then doesn't?
- Fix other people's problems when they're meant to be fixing yours?
- Keep sending you someone who doesn't know you or your network?
- Seem to be a jack of all trades, but a master of none?
- Cause a different problem every time they touch something?

If you answered "Yes!" to any of the above questions, then it's definitely time to find a new IT support provider for your business.

I read recently that over 50% of Australian businesses are unhappy with their current IT support provider. However, making the switch can often be an even more daunting task - how do you stop yourself getting burnt again? This report will give the 10 golden questions you need to ask each of the contenders...

### Question #1 - Do they have different IT support plans defined?

Providing IT support to different businesses is definitely not a case of one size fits all. Some companies want to use IT support providers on an as-required basis, others make a business decision to get outside help for all issues. Both are valid strategies, and any IT support provider who is serious about providing the right support levels to their customer base will have a range of plans (at least 3) to offer you.

### Question #2 - Do they have a formal agreement document that defines exactly what they do and what the cost is?

Like most things in business these days, there is too much at stake to rely on a handshake with your new IT support provider. They need to have a plain English written agreement that precisely identifies the scope of the services and the costs for those services. You also need this Agreement to include a confidentiality clause as you are effectively handing the keys of your business secrets to an



outsider. And finally any Agreement you sign needs to be fair to both parties – not heavily slanted in the provider’s favour (unlike, say, most insurance, utility and telco contracts).

### **Question #3 – Do they have relevant tertiary qualifications and CURRENT Microsoft certifications?**

The IT profession is unlike most others as it has no mandatory accreditation system. For example, organizations that provide engineers, architects, lawyers, dentists, doctors and accountants are regulated to protect their client base from receiving sub-standard or unqualified services. You need to find a provider who’s entire technical team is qualified with some form of IT tertiary qualification (in my experience, a diploma in IT is a great base). And because the IT industry does not stand still, it’s important that your new provider keeps its staff up to date by investing in their ongoing education with current Microsoft certifications (warning - Microsoft certifications that include the phrases Windows 2000 and Windows Server 2003 are NOT current!).

### **Question #4 – Do they have multiple staff on hand to provide both quick response times and a wider spread of knowledge?**

The most common reason we get new clients is because the previous IT support provider was a small one-man-band consulting firm. Or they were relying on someone who was supporting their network on the side (moonlighting). By doing this they think they are saving money because these individuals typically charge less than established IT support firms. The challenge comes when they can’t respond to your emergency or complete your project on time or provide support on your new solution because they have too many clients, they don’t have enough time to keep up-to-date, they get sick, and they go on holiday. Many go out of business because they can’t make enough money, leaving their clients high and dry.

### **Question #5 - Do they have a HelpDesk system in place to provide their IT support?**

It’s one thing to have a guru who just jumps in and starts “fixing” your problem. And it’s another thing completely to have a systemized approach to recording the details of your requirements, recording the actions taken to resolve the issue, and following through to ensure the task has been completed to the client’s satisfaction. Every IT support provider – big or small – must have an industry-recognized HelpDesk software system at the heart of their service delivery operation. A system that adheres to the ITIL standard and that integrates into your monitoring and remote access systems will provide ongoing efficiency, consistency and reliability.

### **Question #6 – Do they monitor networks continuously so that issues can be fixed before they become big problems.**

Every IT support company likes to use the phrase “we’re proactive, not reactive”. The big question is how do they achieve that? Most IT support guys simply use a range of cheap ad-hoc tools to monitor a few client sites for different things like internet access, network performance, server uptime and so on. But to be able to utilise a comprehensive range of tools that are integrated into one solution is vital for any IT support provider that has more than two staff and is looking after more than 10 clients.



## **Question #7 – Do they absolutely promise to check that your backups worked EVERY day?**

Checking backups every day for a week for one client is easy. Checking backups every day FOREVER and for multiple clients requires a procedure, a checklist, an audit process, the right checking tool and sufficient trained staff to cope for absences. Actioning this vital process takes a company-wide commitment to do the right thing and check client backups EVERY day, as promised.

## **Question #8 – Do they provide a clear and concise report every month on the health of your system?**

As well as having all your day to day issues resolved in a timely manner, it's also very important to know whether your system is ticking over smoothly and that there's not a big problem looming. This is best achieved by choosing an IT support provider that uses a comprehensive software solution to provide all their clients with a regular report on the health of their network. We recommend this report be automatically generated (no "manual adjustments" allowed!) and distributed on a monthly basis. We also recommend this report clearly shows a health score marked out of 100, along with colour coding, so clients can very easily gauge the overall system health of their system. And finally, this score card should be based on the measurement of a number of different system factors so that the score displayed is an accurate representation.

## **Question #9 – Do they provide fixed price quotes for all their work?**

In the past the IT support industry based the price of services on an hourly charge-out rate. The big problem with this method is the potential for a slow, poorly trained beginner to cost the customer more money to fix a problem than a quick, well-trained IT expert. These days, almost all professional IT support providers base their prices on a fee for service arrangement. Commonly known as "Managed Service Providers", these organisations can tell a client EVERY TIME how much it's going to cost to perform the work before the work is started – whether it's a small issue or a major project.

## **Question #10 – Do they encourage you to perform reference checking on their existing clients?**

The most important action to take when choosing a new IT support provider is to find out what their existing clients have to say about their standards of service. Anonymous quotes on a website mean virtually nothing. An IT support provider that is proud of its service levels will have multiple client testimonials for you to read through, and will actively encourage you to make contact with them.