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**IT**



# **IT SUPPORT BUYER'S GUIDE**

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**net technical** solutions

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# INTRODUCTION

Thank you for downloading Net Technical Solutions' **'Buyer's Guide'** to IT Support. We hope you find this a useful tool for evaluating your existing IT Support arrangements, and also formulating your future strategy.

## Who should read this guide?

This guide is aimed at anyone and everyone who is looking to review their current IT Support strategy and from our experience some of the most common would be:

- **Managing Directors**  
Looking to evaluate service levels/cost of existing supplier
- **Finance Directors/Managers**  
Primarily focused on costs
- **Operations Managers**  
Looking to improve existing processes
- **Office Managers**  
Tasked with carrying out periodical IT reviews
- **IT Managers**  
Seeking an outsourced partnership for overflow/escalation
- **Companies**  
Evaluating whether to outsource IT Support or keep in-house

## HOW CAN THIS GUIDE HELP YOU?

Let's face it, whichever category you fall into above, reviewing your IT Support strategy seems like a daunting prospect unless you already have a tried and tested method in place. As a result, many organisations simply don't review their IT often enough and stick with their current provider, regardless of service levels and price.

Our aim with this guide is to make the task of reviewing your IT Support **just a little bit easier** and to provide some building blocks to enable you to regularly review your strategy as often as you feel you need.

The likelihood is that your business/organisation is changing and evolving each year, sometimes in a very small way and sometimes dramatically. It is also likely that your IT requirements are changing and evolving at the same time. Therefore, it is important that your IT strategy evolves with you and this booklet is designed to help guide you through the process in a thought-provoking and interesting way.

As we have seen above, there are potentially many different people who will read this document and each individual will have their own aims, their own ideas and their own level of existing IT competency. We have therefore attempted to write this guide in bite sized chunks to enable readers to skip over sections which they don't consider relevant.

So let's start with the **basics**...



## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'IT SUPPORT'?

Most organisations, however large or small, rely on IT hardware, software and services in order to carry out their day-to-day business. Some companies may only have very light IT usage with a small number of PCs running standard Microsoft Office applications such as Word, Excel and Outlook for email. Some may have a single in-house server for central file storage and domain control, whilst others may be extensive IT users with a number of servers performing different functions and a mixture of in-house and Cloud-based applications.

The one thing which all of the above have in common is that **the IT infrastructure will not simply look after itself**. Every day most users will come across some aspect of their IT which is not working as well as it should and frequently the problem is more serious, affecting a number of users simultaneously - such as emails not working or the Internet being 'down'.

IT Support covers an array of technology services, providing assistance with computer hardware, software, networks, services, security and much, much more. Typically these services help users solve specific problems with an IT product or service, alongside IT maintenance services which help your company to prevent problems from occurring in the first place.



## WHAT TYPE OF IT SUPPORT DO YOU NEED?

The level of support your organisation requires should be determined by the intensity of your IT usage, the complexity of your IT network and ultimately your budget. If we could all afford our own in-house IT Manager we would have one – but is that strictly true? Let's briefly examine the **different types of approach** which companies take.

### The 'Wing & A Prayer' Approach

Thankfully this model is becoming less and less common, however some organisations still rely on a "wing and a prayer" to get them through. The business does **little or nothing** to keep their systems and network up to date or protect their data and the owners hope that hackers won't be interested in them. What they don't realise is that hackers and viruses are simply looking for vulnerability **anywhere** and the size/nature of the organisation is of no consequence. Companies who rely on this model may have got away with it so far but it will take a miracle to keep them problem free in the future, particularly with the rise in cybercrime.

“ Companies who rely on this model may have got away with it so far but it will take a miracle to keep them problem free in the future. ”

### The 'Go-To' IT Person

This is the person in the office to whom everyone looks if they have an IT problem. It's not part of their primary role in the business but they've either been **'landed with it'** or have some IT knowledge and are genuinely best placed to help. It may even have been built into their job description. The great benefit of this person is that they are based on site and usually available to help quickly. They have also built up a good internal knowledge base and there is no additional cost to the business – unless they ask for a pay rise as a result! They may be able to set up a new PC or laptop, however higher level installations could be a problem. Other downsides include: being distracted from their main role in the business; limitations in their IT knowledge; being good at the quick-n-easy things but bigger problems take longer to fix (or are unfixable); the focus tends to be on break-fix rather than a proactive strategy and they are prone to taking 20-25 days holiday every year! It's also worth reflecting on the fact that **'a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing'**...

## The 'One Man Band'

Here, for a relatively small fee, the IT Support is managed outside of your organisation by a sole trader or small one-person limited company, thus allowing staff to get on with their primary day job. One of the biggest benefits of working with just one person is that they will know your network inside out and over time you can build a strong personal relationship with them. The drawbacks however are that they also have other clients which they need to service and they **can't be in two or three places at once**. They also have holidays and sickness to contend with, you are limited to their own specific IT knowledge/ability and finally it's not always a good idea to tie up all the knowledge of your IT network with one person. Again, lower to mid-level infrastructure installations should be fine, however you are limited by their knowledge and expertise with certain hardware and software technologies so they will most likely only suggest solutions which are in their comfort zone and not necessarily what's best for you.

## The Outsourced Managed Service Provider

Typically, the next step up in an organisation's IT Support strategy is to move from a 'one man band' to an outsourced '**MSP**'. The monthly fees are likely to be a little dearer and you may lose a little bit of that 'personal touch' however the benefits are numerous: there are more people available to answer calls; they will often have case handling systems in place; there is proactive monitoring of your servers and network; you are not reliant on one person's skills and expertise; there is a better

**spread of knowledge** and more time spent on strategy, and often they will be able to provide complementary IT services such as Internet, backup, anti-virus, spam filtering, etc. Installations will be bread and butter to these sort of organisations and they will likely have a good spread of abilities in their technical team to cover most requirements. We will look more closely at this model later in this guide.

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### **\*\*One word of warning\*\***

Be very careful when choosing your Managed Service Provider as they are not all the same. More often than not you get what you pay for, so if you are offered a price which looks too good to be true – it probably is! Later in this guide we look more closely at factors to consider and questions you can ask a service provider to try to establish their suitability.

## The Network Manager/ Engineer

When a company gets to a certain size and level of IT infrastructure they will often employ a Network Manager/Engineer who is on the payroll at mid-level and able to manage the day to day support of the network. This person will most likely have some form of IT qualification or previous IT experience and will be capable of **troubleshooting basic user issues**, along with a small level of network and server based problems. Strategy is not typically their thing however and often they are limited when it comes to the higher level IT Support issues, along with the holiday and sickness (time-off) issue again. For these reasons, most companies who employ a Network Manager/Engineer also contract an outsourced MSP on a reduced monthly fee to cover holiday and sickness, high level escalation and ongoing strategy.

## The IT Manager

Larger organisations with extensive and diverse IT networks will usually employ an IT Manager to oversee their technical operations. They may get involved with a small amount of day to day support but primarily their focus is operational functionality and current/future strategy. These people tend to be **higher level payroll employees** with a salary dictated by their level of knowledge and experience. They will most likely have either a Network Manager/Engineer(s) working with them or will employ an outsourced MSP to provide day-to-day helpdesk style support. Installations will usually be strategised, planned and implemented in conjunction with the MSP.

“...local branches can feel restricted by Head Office policy and procedures. More and more we are seeing local branches employing a local MSP to work alongside the Head Office IT team providing fast, responsive IT Support.”

## Head Office

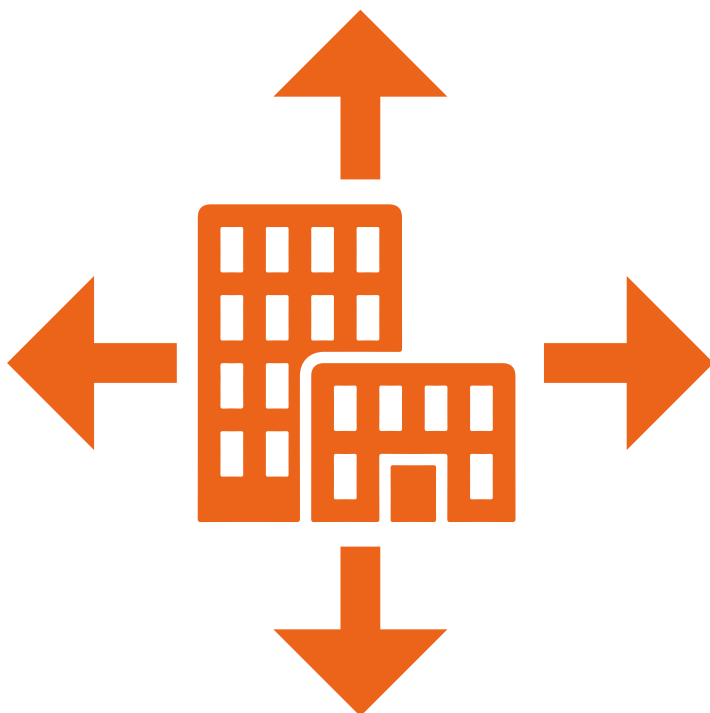
Another model we frequently come across is when a local branch of an organisation is looked after by the Head Office IT team. This is usually an in-house team consisting of an IT Manager and Network Engineer(s) depending on the size of the organisation. Responsiveness can often be patchy (depending on work levels and prioritisation) and **local branches can feel restricted** by Head Office policy and procedures. More and more we are seeing local branches employing a local MSP to work alongside the Head Office IT team providing fast, responsive IT Support.



## WHY SHOULD I OUTSOURCE MY IT?

If you have outgrown the 'Go-To IT Person' or 'One Man Band' model, or if you are employing an internal IT resource who is struggling to keep up, there are some compelling reasons for outsourcing some or all of your organisation's IT Support to a Managed Service Provider. These include but are not limited to the following:

- Allows your staff to **focus on their job**, instead of worrying about IT issues
- Wider **depth** of IT knowledge compared to just one person
- High levels of **service desk availability** and pre-defined response times
- **Lower annual costs** compared to employing the equivalent person/people
- A more **strategic** and **proactive** approach, rather than break-fix
- IT strategy based on your needs, rather than the **limitations** of one person
- Better **spread of knowledge**, rather than being tied up with an individual
- **No PAYE** to worry about and other costs of employment/recruitment
- **No holiday/illness cover** to consider
- More likely to keep up with **rapidly changing technology** and regulations
- Greater ability to **leverage investments** and get the most out of your IT
- Mature case management systems to deliver **efficient problem solving**
- Access to **complementary services** wrapped up into one monthly bill



## OUTSOURCED IT SUPPORT MODELS

So you've decided to outsource your company's IT Support or to review your existing outsourced IT arrangement, but which pricing/service model should you opt for? There are many different ways in which outsourced IT providers deliver support and you should choose carefully depending upon your organisation's needs and requirements:

### Pay-As-You-Go

This service comes with no fixed monthly fee and the provider will only charge as and when required to fix problems. This is great for organisations with very sporadic issues however the call out charges are often high and there is little proactivity or strategy as you are effectively not paying for it. This is **reactive** IT Support and the price you pay will simply be an hourly or daily rate based on usage.

“ This is great for organisations with very sporadic issues however the call out charges are often high and there is little proactivity or strategy as you are effectively not paying for it. ”

### Pre-Paid

Many IT Support providers allow you to purchase a **block of minutes** at a discounted rate, depending on likely usage. Some allow the minutes to carry over month by month, whilst others have them expiring if unused. Minutes are used when needed and topped up as and when required. Models such as this allow a company to budget to a certain extent whilst allowing the flexibility to spend more or less depending on usage. Again, models such as this tend to be more reactive and network monitoring will be charged as an added extra.

### Remote Only

Here, for a fixed monthly or annual fee, the provider will attend to all remedial IT problems relating to your network **via remote services**. This could simply be a telephone call to the helpdesk or a remote session connected to your PC/laptop, or a direct connection to your server to fix a problem. Should the provider need to come to site to fix the problem, **additional charges** will be incurred. Remote only customers may have an inferior Service Level Agreement compared to the all-inclusive model. The pricing of this model is usually based on the number of servers, PCs and network devices which require supporting, and network monitoring will usually be included.

## All Inclusive

Again, for a fixed monthly or annual fee, the provider will attend to all remedial IT problems relating to your network regardless of whether this requires telephone, remote access or

**onsite attendance**. The only additional charges should be for project work which falls outside of day-to-day support.

Typically this service will carry the highest SLAs and will be much more proactive, often including a number of scheduled

onsite service visits. As with the remote service, the pricing is based on the level of IT equipment requiring cover, although the costs are slightly higher to account for the onsite attendance. This is the ultimate insurance policy and ensures that when there is a problem, the IT provider will work hard and fast to resolve it as quickly and efficiently as possible.

“ Typically this service will carry the highest SLAs and will be much more proactive, often including a number of scheduled onsite service visits. ”

## User Based

Some outsourced IT providers operate a user-based model where regardless of the overall level of IT infrastructure, you will pay a fixed monthly fee **per user** for all IT Support requirements. For larger organisations this provides an easy way to budget with the price moving up or down each month depending on number of users. It does tend to work out to be more expensive, however, as the 'per user' price is front-loaded to include the likely cost of supporting the back-end network.

## POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING YOUR IT PROVIDER

As mentioned earlier in this guide, not all outsourced IT providers are the same and it's important to think carefully about what you require from your potential IT partner.

### Personal vs Responsive

One of the great challenges faced by outsourced IT Support companies is how to **strike the right balance** between offering a personal service whilst at the same time providing a high availability of staff to deal with issues when they arise. Too few bodies on the helpdesk will result in a highly personal service but a low level of availability and responsiveness, whilst too many may result in a more impersonal service but at least someone is there to pick up the phone or answer your email when needed.

It's a good idea to work out what your organisation needs most and ensure that the provider can deliver. In some cases the larger IT providers will have ways to strike the right balance between the two so be sure to quiz them on this.

### Reactive vs Proactive

It's important to decide what type of IT partner you require before you start on the process of choosing. It may be that you are happy dealing with strategy yourselves and literally just need someone in the background to pick up the pieces when things go wrong. This is also known as the Break-Fix model where you are basically waiting for problems and **reacting when they occur**. It also usually means that other aspects of your network such as software updates, antivirus, backups, domains, etc. are left to you to sort out!

More often than not, organisations require their IT partner to be an **active participant** in their daily lives - monitoring the network and reporting on problems and issues, discussing new products and services, keeping you up to date from a security perspective and working with you on budgets and strategy as and when required. With the proactive model your IT provider is also more likely to take care of all the other aspects such as performing test backup restores, ensuring antivirus definitions are up-to-date, applying software patches, renewing domains, etc.

## Remote vs Onsite

Another important decision is whether you are looking for a service which is delivered remotely, or whether you also require onsite attendance when the need arises. If you have some IT knowledge in-house or your needs are fairly low-tech then remote may be the best option but if you are **heavily reliant on IT** to the point where your business would stop if something is broken, then you will most likely want to include some form of onsite attendance.

“ if you are heavily reliant on IT to the point where your business would stop if something is broken, then you will most likely want to include some form of onsite attendance. ”

As we have seen, remedial onsite attendance can either be inclusive or charged as required but you should also consider whether the provider is able to include proactive **scheduled service visits** and how often you require these. The best advice is to ensure you have at least one proactive scheduled service visit each year, where an engineer attends your site to carry out a general health-check on the server and networking equipment and ensure everything is clean, updated and in working order. Often this will include a report on the state of your network with comments, observations and recommendations.

## 24/7/365 vs Standard Office Hours

One of the most important but often overlooked questions is what hours of cover do you require? If you offer services to your customers 24 hours a day, 7 days per week, 365 days per year, do you also require your IT network covered during this time and do you require the same level of SLAs to apply regardless? If so then this will limit the number of organisations who can provide this service, and often it is only the very large **national IT providers** who can provide this, meaning that the ‘personal local service’ can be compromised.

To get around this problem, many service providers will offer a **‘best endeavours’** service for any out of hours requests where a skeleton service operates for higher level problems. Most IT providers will offer early starts and late finishes and so it is not uncommon for the helpdesk to operate from 8am until 6pm.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK IT PROVIDERS

Never assume that every IT service provider can deliver ALL the things you need. Instead here are some questions to help assess their offerings, experience and capabilities:

- What type and level of support does the IT Support provider offer?
- Does the provider cover all of your geographical region(s)?
- What experience do they have in dealing with companies of your size and industry and are they familiar with any industry-specific software you use?
- How much flexibility does the provider offer in accommodating your specific needs and requirements?
- Who are the provider's strategic partners and do they bill ALL services themselves or will invoices for various services come from other providers?
- Are your provider's pricing practices flexible or rigid?
- How will the price change as your needs scale up or down over time?
- Is the bottom line figure fully comprehensive or are there incidents that are priced separately?
- What are the provider's SLAs and how are incidents logged in terms of priority?
- Will one individual handle the day-to-day details of your account from a technical perspective, or is the knowledge spread amongst the team?
- How is information on your organisation/network stored and made available to the IT provider's staff?
- How can new incidents be logged and how is the case managed ongoing?
- Is there a named Account Manager in place to deal with non-technical issues such as strategy, commercials, renewals and the overall relationship?
- What are the staff like? Do they seem friendly, are there photos online, do they seem down to earth or overly techy?
- What are the provider's current and future investment plans?
- How strong is the provider's financial health?
- What industry recognition has the provider had and what relevant qualifications do they hold?
- How many business customers does the service provider have - where are they based and how satisfied are they? Look for testimonials online.
- How easy is to obtain references on service quality and customer satisfaction from current/past clients?

## ABOUT NET TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS

So what qualifies us to write a Buyer's Guide to IT Support?

Well, **NET TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS** is a Managed Service Provider with nearly 20 years' experience in providing personalised IT services to a variety of organisations throughout Surrey, Hampshire and the Home Counties. During the lifetime of our business we have grown from effectively a one man band into a medium sized organisation and throughout the years have probably employed most of the support models discussed in this guide. If not, then we have certainly come across each scenario on many occasions, and we have learnt from talking to our customers what works and what doesn't work.

We currently employ a responsive and skilled team of 35 people, offering the full package for all ICT requirements, from day to day PC, server and network support through to network installations, strategy and advice.

Our range of services includes:

- **Proactive IT Service Desk** – friendly and experienced staff who are on hand to deal with your issues and resolve them quickly, supported by our own bespoke case management system.
- **Advice and guidance** – through regular reviews and checks, we can make sure that your existing equipment is kept up-to-date and working efficiently.
- **Supply and installation** – based on impartial advice, we can help you select the right upgrades or new equipment to meet your budget and technical requirements and keep your network up to date.
- **Network security** – by putting in place the right support, software and hardware, we can keep your company's network and critical data protected from unwanted threats, viruses and malware.
- **IT services** – from Internet connectivity, domain/web hosting and Office 365, through to spam filtering, anti-virus and offsite backup, we can cater for all your additional IT service requirements. We can even provide Software Development services if you are looking to develop your own bespoke application.

**For more information please visit [www.ntsols.com](http://www.ntsols.com) or contact us on **01252 235255** to request a brochure or to book a free of charge no obligation consultation.**

# WE AIM TO UNDERSTAND YOUR BUSINESS

# NOT JUST YOUR IT

**NET TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS** provides professional, proactive IT support and services for business organisations of all different shapes and sizes. As a friendly, talented and experienced team, we are dedicated to building strong customer relationships and delivering excellent service at an honest price. We love what we do and are constantly investigating new technologies and ways of working, so that we can continually provide reliable solutions that add real value and help create efficient, productive business environments.

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“ Having been burned by inadequate IT helpdesks many times over the years and patronised or, conversely, baffled by ‘techspeak’, it is with pleasure that I feel moved to commend your support team and the service I have received. I was helped through the problem with consummate professionalism and your engineer approached the issue with a really friendly but efficient approach. ”  
Mark Calvert, AHL

“ Please accept our thanks, following the recent server installation. The whole project, which included moving onto Office 365, was carefully planned and executed with very little disruption to our business. I was concerned that there would be long periods of downtime so I was delighted when we were able to continue working within about 45 minutes of switch-over. ”  
Mark Staples, PPK

“ We are really pleased to have found Net Technical Solutions and are delighted with the development work that you have carried out for us. Right from the start, we were offered friendly, professional advice and the work was carried out with great diligence and attention to detail. The system is far easier to use and has made a real difference to staff productivity. The staff at Net Technical are always so helpful and explain the technical issues in a non-patronising way, which has been very reassuring. ”  
Stephen Hamlet, IAPA

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