Your Secret Weapon to Finding a Managed Service Provider (MSP)

How to Choose the Right MSP for Your Business Needs

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INTRODUCTION

Choosing the right Managed Service Provider (MSP) can feel like a daunting mission—but armed with the right strategy and questions, you'll be well-equipped to find the perfect partner for your business.

Just like you rely on professionals for specialized services—a mechanic for your car, a hairdresser for your look, or a dentist for your teeth—partnering with an expert in IT management can keep your business running smoothly.

Think of this guide as your secret weapon for cutting through the fluff and landing the perfect partner to handle your IT headaches (so you don't have to).

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Why an MSP is Your Competitive Advantage

Managing IT isn't just about turning computers on and off again (though that does help sometimes). It's about juggling 24/7 monitoring, fending off cybercriminals, and keeping your systems updated—all while ensuring your business stays ahead of the curve.

Sure, you could handle IT in-house, but that means pulling your team away from what they're good at.

Instead of stretching your team thin or constantly playing catch-up with new technologies, why not leave it to the pros? A good MSP acts as an extension of your team, offering:

- **Proactive IT Management:** Ensuring systems run smoothly 24/7.
- **Robust Cybersecurity:** Protecting your business from ever-evolving threats.
- **IT Trend Expertise:** Helping you adopt the right emerging tech that helps you grow.
- **Reliable Support:** Providing immediate help whenever issues arise.
- **Business Focus:** Unifying technology strategy with business drivers.

The trick is finding the right MSP—one that you trust, who gets your business, speaks your language, and doesn't drown you in jargon. If you're not in the industry, it can be hard to detect when something isn't right. You want a provider who knows what they're doing, has tried-and-true processes for doing it well, and will partner well with you.

You're likely to be signing a multi-year contract with these folks. Find people you're excited to commit to.

Here are some tips on how to grill them like a pro.

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The Must-Ask Questions

Treat these questions like your IT lie detector test—they'll reveal whether an MSP is the real deal or just putting on a show.

Pricing & Structure

What pricing models do you offer (fixed fee, tiered, or pay-as-you-go)?

Why ask this? It's important to know how much you'll actually be paying and whether it fits your budget. It's like buying a new car—you want to know the total cost upfront, not get hit with surprise add-ons later. Unfortunately, MSPs don't all write their pricing the same way; some may charge extra for onsite visits after a certain threshold of labor time spent monthly, or after a ticket number limit.

Are there additional costs or fees for services outside the standard agreement?

Why ask this? Savvy MSPs will want to make sure your technology is supportable and stable before entering into a contract with you to maintain it. That being said, they may have projects to add or replace equipment or software to bring you to their desired standard or require subscriptions to additional programs for added security, for example.

How do you handle unexpected IT needs or emergencies?

Why ask this? Tech problems don't have a schedule. Knowing how an MSP deals with those unexpected issues gives you peace of mind when the unexpected inevitably happens.

Onboarding Process

What does your onboarding process look like for new clients?

Why ask this? Onboarding should be easy, not a drawn-out, painful process. A solid MSP will have a clear, efficient plan to get you up and running with minimal downtime. They should know pretty confidently how long it'll take, what they need to get it done, and what your role in the process should be.

How will you integrate with our existing IT systems and staff?

Why ask this? You don't need an MSP that disrupts everything you've already built. A good MSP will integrate smoothly with what you've got in place without causing chaos. You should reasonably expect your MSP to set up meetings to kick off and then facilitate the onboarding process between you, your team, and their teams.

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Services Provided

What exactly is included in your standard package?

Why ask this? You need to know what you're getting for your money. If your MSP can't give you a clear breakdown of their services, it's time to move on. They should also be clear about what they don't do.

Do you offer any add-on services if we need something extra?

Why ask this? Your business may need specialized services down the line. It's great to know if your MSP can offer those and at what cost, so you're not scrambling to find another provider later.

Compliance & Security

Do you have experience with industry-specific compliance, like HIPAA, GDPR, NIST, etc.?

Why ask this? If you're in a regulated industry, you need to make sure your MSP can keep you compliant. This question helps you avoid future headaches and legal risks.

Do you run regular security tests or vulnerability checks?

Why ask this? Threats evolve fast, and you want an MSP who's proactive about testing and updating their security measures to stay ahead of the game.

What security measures do you have in place to protect client data?

Why ask this? Your MSP will have full access to your systems and your data. They can only protect you if they're also protecting themselves first.

Industry Expertise

Have you worked with businesses in our industry?

Why ask this? An MSP who's familiar with your industry can better understand your unique needs. Experience in your sector means they're better prepared to solve problems that others may not even anticipate. See if they can name industry-specific systems or tools.

Can I talk to a few of your existing clients for references?

Why ask this? Real-world feedback is invaluable. Speaking to other clients gives you a clearer picture of what working with this MSP is really like.

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Support & Communication

How quickly do you respond to urgent IT issues?

Why ask this? Time is money. If something goes wrong, you need to know how fast they'll be able to step in and fix it.

What hours is support available?

Why ask this? Are your working hours aligned with theirs? If not, can you make a plan for service requests that your team has when your MSP is unavailable?

How do you communicate with us when issues arise? (e.g., ticketing systems, email, phone)?

Why ask this? Communication is the backbone of a successful MSP partnership. You want to know how they'll keep you updated and how easy it is to get in touch when something goes wrong.

How do you regularly maintain communication with your clients?

Why ask this? Your MSP should have a framework for checking in, adjusting strategy, and making future plans with you.

Technical Expertise

What technology partners do you work with, and what does that mean for us?

Why ask this? The right partnerships with tech vendors can give you access to top-tier tools and resources. This question helps you see what kind of tech expertise the MSP can bring to the table.

What certifications or qualifications do your technicians have?

Why ask this? Certifications matter. They show that the MSP's team is up-to-date with the latest technology and industry standards.

How do you stay up-to-date with the latest IT trends and technologies?

Why ask this? Technology is always evolving. A good MSP will invest in continuous learning to keep their team sharp and ready for whatever new challenges come their way.

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Culture & Values

What is your company's approach to customer service and client relationships?

Why ask this? You want an MSP that treats you like more than just a paycheck. Ask this to understand whether they prioritize building long-term, supportive relationships with their clients, or if they view each engagement as a transaction. A good MSP should be invested in your success.

What is your approach to work-life balance for your team, and how does that impact the way you work with clients?

Why ask this? It's important that your MSP takes care of their team, as a happy, well-supported team is more likely to be productive, engaged, and reliable. A company that fosters a healthy work-life balance is likely to have a stronger, more focused team that delivers better service.

What are your core values, and how do you incorporate them into your work with clients?

Why ask this? This question gets to the heart of who they are. An MSP should have core values that align with yours—whether it's a commitment to transparency, a focus on innovation, or an emphasis on teamwork. A shared set of values will make your partnership smoother and ensure you're both working toward the same goals.

How does your team stay motivated and engaged, and how does that affect the service you provide?

Why ask this? An MSP that invests in their team's motivation and growth will likely provide more dedicated and high-quality service. When they care about their employees' growth, it reflects in the attention they pay to your IT needs. This question helps you gauge whether they're just doing the job or actually passionate about helping you succeed.

How do you handle challenges, and how do you ensure we're a part of the solution process?

Why ask this? Problems will inevitably arise, but it's all about how they're handled. You want to know how your MSP will approach problem-solving—whether they'll keep you in the loop and ensure you're part of the solution or if you'll be left in the dark. A collaborative approach makes the whole process smoother and less stressful.

Choosing the right Managed Service Provider (MSP) isn't just a task to cross off your to-do list—it's a game-changing move for your business. With the right MSP, your IT can go from being a stressor to a strategic advantage. And while asking the right questions helps you identify the perfect fit, that's only step one. Step two? Building a strong, collaborative partnership to unlock the full potential of managed IT services.

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Building a Strong MSP Partnership

Congratulations—you've done the hard part and picked your MSP. But don't stop there! A solid partnership doesn't just happen; it's built on collaboration, trust, and a shared commitment to your success. Here's how to turn your MSP relationship into a powerhouse partnership:

Keep Communication Flowing

IT can't work in a vacuum, and neither can your MSP. Regular, open communication is the glue that keeps your partnership strong.

- **Share Your Goals:** Got big plans for growth, new projects, or operational changes? Keep your MSP in the loop so they can align their services with your vision.
- **Ask for Updates:** Expect your MSP to proactively share updates about your IT environment, security, and any potential risks on the horizon.

Pro Tip: A good MSP will want to schedule a recurring check-in to discuss performance, projects, and priorities (think of it as your IT status meeting—without the boring PowerPoints).

Embrace Transparency

No one likes surprises in IT—except the good ones, like finding out your MSP just saved you from a major cyber threat. To avoid the bad surprises:

- **Be Upfront About Challenges:** If your IT environment has quirks or legacy systems, don't keep it a secret. The more your MSP knows, the better they can plan.
- **Stay Honest About Your Needs:** If priorities shift or something isn't working, say so. Transparency goes both ways, and your MSP will appreciate the honesty.

Regularly Review Performance

The only way to know if your MSP is delivering is to evaluate their work. Make it a habit to review their performance and results.

- **Set Measurable Goals:** Work with your MSP to define key performance indicators (KPIs) like response times, resolution rates, and uptime percentages.
- **Celebrate Wins:** When your MSP nails it—whether it's preventing a security breach or resolving a tricky issue—acknowledge their hard work.

Pro Tip: Use reviews as a two-way street. Provide feedback, but also ask how you can help them better serve your business.

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Why a Strong MSP Partnership Matters

A great MSP relationship isn't just about keeping your IT systems online (although that's important). It's about creating a partnership that:

- **Boosts Efficiency:** With streamlined IT management, your team can focus on growing your business instead of putting out fires.
- **Enhances Security:** A collaborative MSP will proactively protect your business from threats, giving you peace of mind.
- **Drives Innovation:** With IT off your plate, you can explore new tools, processes, and strategies to gain a competitive edge.

By asking the right questions and fostering a strong partnership, you'll transform your MSP from a vendor into a true ally for your business.

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The Secret Weapon Combo

Remember, finding the right MSP isn't just about checking boxes—it's about building a partnership that makes your business stronger, safer, and more efficient. With the right questions and an open line of communication, you can make sure you're choosing an MSP that will help your business grow and succeed.

Ready to find your perfect MSP match? Go ahead and start asking the right questions, and soon you'll have a tech partner you can trust.

P.S. Don't miss the handy checklist on the last page—it ties everything together for you!

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IT Terminology Glossary

Backup & Disaster Recovery (BDR)

The process of securing data backups and having a recovery plan in place in case disaster strikes—whether it's a data breach, hardware failure, or natural disaster. The goal is to ensure business continuity.

- *Why it matters: BDR ensures your data is safe and recoverable, minimizing downtime and preventing catastrophic losses.*

Best Practices

A set of recommended actions, processes, or methods that are considered the most effective for achieving desired outcomes in a specific area, such as IT, security, or management.

- *Why it matters: Following best practices helps ensure consistent results, improves efficiency, reduces errors, and enhances overall performance by applying proven, industry-recognized strategies.*

Business Continuity Plan (BCP)

A strategic approach to preparing for and responding to disruptions ensures your business can continue to operate during and after a crisis.

- *Why it matters: A solid BCP minimizes downtime, protects critical assets, and enables rapid recovery, safeguarding your business against potential threats and disasters.*

Change Management

A structured process for making changes to IT systems. Whether it's a new software installation or a system upgrade, change management ensures that updates are made smoothly without causing disruptions.

- *Why it matters: Structured change management reduces risks, ensuring IT updates don't cause unexpected downtime or issues.*

Cloud Services

Remote IT services hosted on the internet, such as data storage, computing power, and applications. MSPs manage these environments for clients to ensure security, availability, and performance.

- *Why it matters: Cloud services improve flexibility, scalability, and performance, while the MSP ensures these resources remain secure and available.*

Commitment

This refers to the promises made by the MSP regarding the level of service and support they'll provide, including specific timeframes, resources, and deliverables.

- *Why it matters: Commitments ensure your MSP's promises are defined and measurable, keeping service delivery transparent and making sure everyone is on the same page.*

Cybersecurity

A set of practices and tools used to protect networks, systems, and data from cyberattacks, unauthorized access, and other digital threats. MSPs help safeguard their clients' operations with comprehensive cybersecurity measures.

- *Why it matters: Strong cybersecurity measures protect your business from costly breaches, downtime, loss of reputation, and more.*

Data Protection & Compliance Services

A service that ensures your business complies with industry regulations and standards while protecting sensitive data from breaches or misuse.

- *Why it matters: Compliance reduces legal and financial risks, while strong data protection fosters trust and safeguards your reputation.*

Documentation

The process of creating and maintaining detailed records of your IT systems, processes, and assets to ensure clarity, consistency, and operational efficiency.

- *Why it matters: Comprehensive documentation improves troubleshooting, reduces downtime, and simplifies onboarding, knowledge transfer, and system management.*

Downtime

When a system or service is unavailable, often due to issues or maintenance. Reducing downtime is a key part of what MSPs do to keep systems running smoothly.

- *Why it matters: Less downtime means fewer disruptions, keeping your business operational and minimizing lost revenue.*

Endpoint Detection & Response (EDR)

A security solution that continuously monitors and responds to suspicious activity on devices like desktops, laptops, and mobile phones, identifying and addressing threats in real-time.

- *Why it matters: EDR enables early detection of cyber threats, provides detailed insights into potential attacks, and allows for rapid remediation to prevent data breaches.*

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Endpoint Management

Managing all the devices (laptops, desktops, smartphones, etc.) connected to a network to ensure they are secure and properly configured.

- *Why it matters: Proper endpoint management protects your network from vulnerabilities, ensuring every device performs as it should and does not put your business/IT infrastructure at risk.*

Escalation

When an issue needs to be handed off to a higher level of expertise within the MSP, either because it's more complex or more urgent. This ensures that problems are resolved by the right person as quickly as possible.

- *Why it matters: Escalation ensures critical problems are addressed efficiently by the experts best equipped to resolve them.*

Helpdesk

A service that provides technical support to end users. Whether it's solving software glitches, password resets, fixing hardware issues, or troubleshooting network problems, the helpdesk is there to help when things go wrong.

- *Why it matters: A responsive helpdesk ensures your employees can stay productive by quickly resolving their IT problems.*

Incident Management

The process of managing IT issues or disruptions. It's about identifying, responding to, and resolving incidents that affect the business's ability to function.

- *Why it matters: Effective incident management minimizes downtime, restores functionality quickly, and reduces business impact.*

Incident Response Plan (IRP)

A documented strategy outlining how an organization will respond to cybersecurity incidents, including breach detection, containment, investigation, and recovery.

- *Why it matters: An effective IRP enables a quick, coordinated response to minimize damage, restore operations, and prevent future incidents.*

Identity & Access Management (IAM)

A solution that controls user access to systems and applications, ensuring the right people have the right access at the right time.

- *Why it matters: IAM helps secure sensitive information, ensures compliance with regulations, and minimizes the risk of unauthorized access or data breaches.*

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Internet Service Provider (ISP)

The company that provides the internet connection for businesses or individuals. They are often part of the MSP conversation when it comes to managing network infrastructure.

- *Why it matters: Reliable internet is critical to your operations, and your MSP can help ensure it's stable, optimized, and supported when issues arise.*

Managed Detection & Response (MDR)

A comprehensive security service that provides 24/7 monitoring, detection, and response to threats across your IT environment, combining advanced technology and expert analysis.

- *Why it matters:* MDR offers proactive threat hunting, quick incident response, and expert-driven security oversight, ensuring your organization is protected from emerging and sophisticated cyber threats.

Managed Services

Ongoing IT support and management provided by the MSP, which can include everything from network monitoring to data backups and security measures. It's about keeping your systems running smoothly without having to worry about it.

- *Why it matters: Managed services allow you to focus on your business while experts handle your IT, reducing risks and improving efficiency.*

Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA)

A security measure that requires users to provide two or more forms of identification before accessing systems or applications, such as a password and a verification code.

- *Why it matters: MFA significantly reduces the risk of unauthorized access by ensuring that stolen credentials alone are not enough to compromise sensitive data.*

Network Monitoring

Constantly watching a company's network to spot any performance issues, security threats, or problems. This is key to proactive support and ensures systems are always running as they should.

- *Why it matters: Network monitoring helps prevent downtime, maintain security, and ensure optimal performance across your IT environment.*

Offboarding

When the service relationship ends, the MSP will help transition the client out, making sure all data is transferred and the systems are properly shut down or handed over.

- *Why it matters: Proper offboarding ensures a smooth transition, preventing data loss or lingering access issues.*

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Onboarding

The process of getting a new client set up with the MSP's services. This typically involves assessments, tool deployment, and making necessary configurations, ensuring that all systems are ready for ongoing support and expectations are set.

- *Why it matters: A smooth onboarding process minimizes disruptions and ensures your IT environment is optimized from the start.*

Patch Management

The practice of keeping software up to date by applying updates and patches. This ensures security vulnerabilities are fixed, and systems stay secure and functional.

- *Why it matters: Regular patching keeps your systems protected from cyberattacks and ensures they operate smoothly.*

Privileged Access Management (PAM)

The process of controlling and monitoring access to critical systems and accounts for users with elevated privileges.

- *Why it matters: PAM minimizes the risk of insider threats and unauthorized actions, ensuring sensitive systems remain secure and compliant.*

Proactive Support

This is when the MSP takes steps to prevent issues from happening before they even arise—whether that's monitoring systems, performing regular maintenance, or optimizing your environment to avoid downtime.

- *Why it matters: Preventing problems saves time, money, and headaches, keeping your systems reliable and minimizing disruptions.*

Quarterly Business Review (QBR)

A quarterly meeting between the MSP and the client to evaluate performance, resolve issues, and discuss future objectives. It's an opportunity to ensure the service is staying aligned with the client's needs.

- *Why it matters: QBRs provide a regular touchpoint to address concerns, plan improvements, and ensure your IT investment delivers maximum value.*

Remote Monitoring & Management (RMM)

Tools and processes that allow the MSP to monitor and manage a client's IT systems remotely. It's all about catching issues early, applying patches, and ensuring everything runs smoothly without needing to be on-site.

- *Why it matters: RMM enables your MSP to manage systems efficiently, resolve problems faster, and ensure uptime without disruptions.*

Security Awareness Training (SAT)

A program designed to educate employees on cybersecurity best practices, phishing identification, and safe IT usage. It helps prevent human error, which is one of the most common causes of cyber incidents.

- *Why it matters: Educated employees are your first line of defense against cyber threats, reducing risks and protecting your business from costly breaches.*

Security Assessments

A process that evaluates your organization's IT infrastructure, policies, and systems to identify vulnerabilities, risks, and areas for improvement.

- *Why it matters: Regular assessments help uncover weaknesses before attackers exploit them, ensuring your systems remain secure, compliant, and resilient against evolving threats.*

Security Information & Event Management (SIEM)

A system that collects, analyzes, and responds to security events and incidents in real time, providing comprehensive visibility and threat intelligence.

- *Why it matters: SIEM enables proactive threat detection and response, helping organizations defend against cyberattacks and maintain compliance with security regulations.*

Service Level Agreement (SLA)

A written agreement that defines the level of service an MSP will provide. It outlines key details like response times, resolution times, and uptime guarantees. Essentially, it's a promise to deliver the agreed-upon service.

- *Why it matters: It sets clear expectations for both you and the MSP, ensuring accountability and helping you measure the quality of service you receive.*

Service Level Objective (SLO)

A specific, measurable target set within an SLA. For example, it could be the goal to resolve 90% of service requests within four hours. It helps both the MSP and client know what to expect in terms of performance.

- *Why it matters: It provides benchmarks to track performance and helps you hold your MSP accountable for agreed-upon terms and goals.*

Staff Augmentation

A service that provides skilled IT professionals to supplement your existing team, helping you bridge talent gaps, manage workloads, or execute specialized projects efficiently.

- *Why it matters: Flexible access to qualified experts ensures your business stays on track, meets deadlines, and adapts to changing demands without the long-term commitment of hiring full-time employees.*

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Technology Business Review (TBR)

A regular check-in where the MSP reviews the client's tech environment, performance, and future needs. It's a proactive way to make sure everything's running smoothly and aligned with the business's goals.

- *Why it matters: TBRs keep your IT strategy aligned with your business goals, ensuring no gaps or inefficiencies arise. It also helps with budgeting and making sure your MSP is also prepared for what's in store for your business.*

Uptime

The percentage of time that a system or service is fully operational. An MSP will often guarantee a certain level of uptime, like 99.9%, to ensure that clients experience minimal downtime.

- *Why it matters: High uptime guarantees ensure your systems are reliable, supporting business productivity, customer satisfaction, and brand reputation.*

Value-Added Reseller (VAR)

A service provider that enhances third-party hardware, software, or IT solutions with additional services like installation, configuration, and support to deliver a complete solution.

- *Why it matters: VARs simplify IT procurement, provide tailored solutions, and ensure businesses get maximum value and functionality from their technology investments.*

Virtual Private Network (VPN)

A technology that creates a secure, encrypted connection over a public network, allowing users to access a private network remotely while keeping their data protected.

- *Why it matters: A VPN ensures privacy and security for sensitive data, even when users are connected to unsecured networks, such as public Wi-Fi, reducing the risk of cyberattacks and data breaches.*

Virtualization

The creation of virtual versions of physical IT components, like servers or storage devices. This allows for better flexibility, scalability, and efficiency in managing IT resources.

- *Why it matters: Virtualization allows you to optimize resources, reduce costs, and scale IT systems efficiently as your business grows.*

Zero-Trust Architecture

A security model that assumes no one, inside or outside the organization, should be trusted by default and requires verification for every user and device attempting to access systems.

- *Why it matters: Zero Trust minimizes the risk of internal and external threats by continuously verifying access requests and minimizing the attack surface.*

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Evaluating an MSP

When it comes to choosing a Managed Service Provider (MSP) for your business, there are a number of things to consider. Check out this helpful checklist when making a decision.

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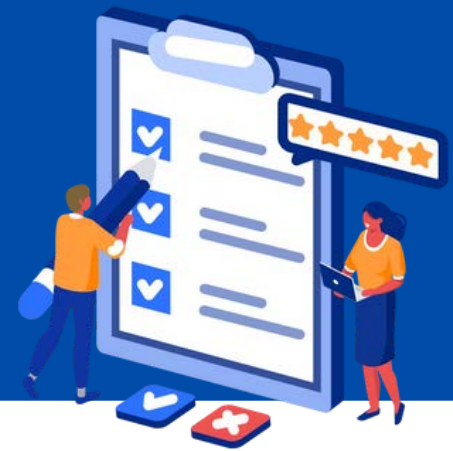
Defining Success
Success looks different to everyone. But, you and your MSP should be on the same page about what that looks like. Without this, the relationship can be frustrating for both sides.

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Growth Goals
If you're looking to grow your business with technology, your MSP should have that mindset too. They should be able to provide a defined roadmap that achieves the growth you're hoping to accomplish.

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Values and Personality
Businesses have core values and MSPs are no different. If your business values and your MSP values are very different, you may find it difficult to see eye to eye. This goes for the same as the personality of your business and the MSP you choose to work with.

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Experience and Reputation
Check out the MSP's customer reviews. Ask others in your industry if they have worked with that MSP and what their experience was like. And lastly, ask the MSP what kind of projects they typically work on or what they have accomplished in the past.

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Proactivity and Support Model
Gone are the days of the break/fix IT model. A good MSP is proactive and monitors/fixes problems before they become significant issues. Going hours, or even days, without resolving the issue could cause considerable damage to your business. Your MSP should be able to be contacted 24/7 when issues arise.

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Contracts and KPIs
Before you get started with an MSP, you need to know what you're signing up for. The agreement you and your MSP decide on should clearly outline what services are provided, the price for services included (and not included), and what benchmarks will be met within a certain amount of time.

Whether you're hiring an MSP to act as your sole technology support or an addition to your internal IT team, all of these are important factors to think about and ask. Evaluating how a MSP works with your business is key to the overall growth and success of your company.

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