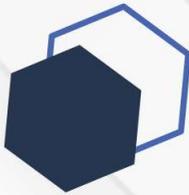


PENNSYLVANIA CEO'S GUIDE TO IT Providers

2025



The CEO's Guide To IT Providers

By Zircuit Solutions Limited

Table of Contents

<u>CHAPTER 1 - AN INTRODUCTION TO IT SERVICES.....</u>	<u>4</u>
THE OLD WAY	4
THE NEW WAY	4
IT'S AN INVESTMENT	5
WHAT'S AT STAKE	5
<u>CHAPTER 2 - UNDERSTANDING YOUR IT NEEDS.....</u>	<u>5</u>
START WHERE YOU ARE	5
SET GOALS	6
<u>CHAPTER 3 - THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF IT SERVICE PROVIDERS.....</u>	<u>7</u>
MANAGED IT SERVICE PROVIDER (MSP)	7
CLOUD SERVICES PROVIDER (CSP).....	8
MANAGED CYBER SECURITY SERVICE PROVIDER (MSSP).....	8
<u>CHAPTER 4 - CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING AN IT PROVIDER.....</u>	<u>9</u>
EXPERTISE AND EXPERIENCE	9
RANGE OF SERVICES OFFERED	10
CUSTOMER SUPPORT AND SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS (SLAs).....	10
COMPLIANCE AND SECURITY STANDARDS	10
PRICING MODELS AND COST-EFFECTIVENESS	11
<u>CHAPTER 5 - WHERE TO FIND YOUR NEW IT PROVIDER</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>CHAPTER 6 - EVALUATE POSSIBLE IT PROVIDERS.....</u>	<u>12</u>
<u>CHAPTER 7 - AVOID THESE 3 GOTCHAS WHEN MOVING TO A NEW IT PROVIDER</u>	<u>14</u>
<u>CHAPTER 8 - POTENTIAL COSTS OF IT SERVICES: KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR GETTING ACCURATE QUOTES.....</u>	<u>16</u>
<u>CHAPTER 9 - MAKING THE CHOICE</u>	<u>17</u>
<u>CHAPTER 10 - IT SUPPORT CONTRACTS WHAT TO AVOID.....</u>	<u>19</u>
1. CONTRACT LENGTH & TERMINATION	19
2. WHO'S LIABLE IF YOU GET HACKED?	20
3. INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY	20
<u>CHAPTER 11 - FUTURE-PROOFING YOUR IT PARTNERSHIP.....</u>	<u>20</u>

1. SET QUARTERLY ACCOUNT REVIEW MEETINGS.	21
2. JOINT INNOVATION/LEARNING SESSIONS.	21
3. RISK MANAGEMENT & COMPLIANCE	21
CHAPTER 12 – BONUS: DEVELOPING A TECHNOLOGY ROADMAP.....	21
CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT	22
PRIORITIZING ROADMAP ITEMS	22
PRIORITY MATRIX	24

Chapter 1 - An Introduction to IT Services

The old way

Once upon a time, using a computer in business was considered futuristic. In those early days, it felt like everything related to information technology was new and experimental.

Things have moved on, and now almost all businesses cannot operate without some form of technology.

Be it a single laptop or a fleet of servers all connected to a corporate cloud, there's management and compliance required.

The new way

IT Services have evolved from what was once a desktop computer that may have been upgraded and repaired once every 6 months by the "IT guy," to something called managed IT service providers (MSPs) for short.

You may already have one of these services or are contemplating how you'll effectively source and manage everything related to hardware/software and data in your business.

Modern-day MSPs are invaluable in organizations of all sizes, helping you and your team navigate the headaches of technical support but also in understanding and complying with the ever-changing cyber threat and data compliance landscape.

No longer is the IT guy rumbling under your desk to find the power switch; they've evolved to manage your IT needs and help you achieve your business goals through smart investments in technology.

It's an investment

That last line can't be understated; many businesses see IT and technology as a cost, but with the right IT provider, you can turn what looks like a cost in the business into an investment. For every one dollar you spend, in return, you can get back a tenfold or even a hundredfold multiplier.

However, achieving this technology investment strategy is not simple and takes time. First, there's the whole process of looking at the business processes, which can be streamlined using smart tools such as AI or software automation.

Then there's the realization of transforming processes and data within your business to leverage opportunities that drive growth and innovation in your business.

These things don't come easily, but with focus, time, and the right IT provider, you can achieve greatness.

The dark side to all this is our ever-increasing reliance on technology to operate our businesses. What happens if your business systems are compromised and you are held to ransom? Would the business still be able to operate? Do you have the right protocols and procedures in place? What does your response plan even look like?

What's at stake

That's not all, though. Ransomware and viruses are one thing, but what about your brand and reputation with suppliers and clients in your marketplace? For example, an attacker could leak sensitive data or sit unknowingly in your corporate network for weeks, if not months, before doing all sorts of unpleasant damage to your business.

These concerns, along with the business opportunities and technology-led investment growth, place IT Service providers in a unique position in your business.

The question you now have to ask is whether you have the right partner in place.

Chapter 2 - Understanding Your IT Needs

Start where you are

When choosing a new IT provider, they will ask a series of questions to better understand your business and help build a technical roadmap.

The first step is to understand your IT needs by assessing your current IT infrastructure.

This usually involves a series of questions posed to you to understand what is set up in the business. Here's a good example of the answers you should have ready, some of which you may need to obtain from your current IT provider:

- How many staff are in the organization, and how many of those staff have a device?

Commonly referred to as users, the first step is to understand the user count and how many devices need management. It's not just laptops and desktops; you should also account for company mobile devices and tablets/iPads.

IT providers often keep an asset register of all devices managed within the organization, so ask to see this if one is available.

In addition to user devices, there's also the topology of your network, how your IT systems are set up, what's cloud-based, what's local in the office, and what may be located elsewhere in a private/public data center.

The network infrastructure and IT landscape are usually documented with a network map or something similar, so it's worth asking for a copy of this as it will allow you to better understand what is being managed in your business.

Once you have an idea of the number of users, devices, network, and cloud infrastructure, you can then build a list of gaps you know exist and potential improvements.

There are two types of gaps commonly found: the gaps the business is aware of and the gaps that are unknown—this is where the true power of an outsourced IT provider comes in.

A fresh set of eyes looking at your IT and cybersecurity setup can spot gaps easily, but it's much harder to see some of these gaps when you are working in the business daily. The old saying "can't see the forest for the trees" applies here, especially when it comes to cybersecurity and technology, as it's ever-changing.

Set goals

Finally, you need to establish short-term and long-term goals when it comes to choosing a new IT service provider.

The gaps and problem areas that you and your staff may have identified should be at the top of their priority list and can usually be broken down into short-term and long-term goals.

As part of engaging with a new provider, you have to be clear about the issues with the current provider and determine if these issues are genuinely due to the service provider or something that has manifested from within the business itself.

A classic example of this is underinvestment, as IT is often seen as a cost rather than something that can drive the business forward.

This underinvestment can go ignored, with the IT service provider regularly recommending solutions and changes to infrastructure that are overlooked. Ignore these recommendations for too long, and they start to accumulate into real problems within the business.

To be clear, you need to have a continuous improvement plan for your IT and cybersecurity needs within the business to keep up with the changes in cyber risks and technology.

Chapter 3 - The different types of IT service providers.

When it comes to choosing the right IT service provider for your business, you must first understand the various types of IT service providers available. As technology evolves rapidly, IT providers have increasingly specialized their services.

The IT market has evolved from small one-person operations offering what is known as a break/fix model or blocks of hours to support a business's IT needs.

While this is cost-effective for businesses on a tight budget, it often doesn't offer long-term benefits. Providers that still offer break/fix IT support may not prioritize their customers' best interests. This is because there's no incentive to manage the client's IT proactively; they profit from the frequency of IT issues.

Conversely, Managed Service Providers (MSPs) adopt a proactive approach with a fixed monthly cost. Regardless of the number of problems that arise, MSPs address these within the agreed monthly fee. This model incentivizes MSPs to reduce IT support needs by actively managing and monitoring the client's IT infrastructure.

Let's examine the different types of providers and the advantages and disadvantages of each:

Managed IT Service Provider (MSP)

Pros:

- Access to a vast pool of technical knowledge with IT support engineers and project-specific engineers on hand to manage your business's IT needs.
- MSPs generally charge a fixed monthly fee, ensuring predictable costs and professional management of the network/infrastructure.

- Many MSPs now prioritize cybersecurity when supporting businesses, often outsourcing security-related activities to software solutions.

Cons:

- Typically, a contractual agreement of 12, 24, or 36 months is required, which necessitates careful selection due to the commitment involved.

Cloud Services Provider (CSP)

Pros:

- CSPs are specialists in providing cloud services and focus exclusively on cloud solutions for their clients.

Cons:

- Because CSPs concentrate solely on cloud services, they may not support physical office IT infrastructure, and there might be gaps in cybersecurity support, unlike MSPs that offer comprehensive services.

Managed Cyber Security Service Provider (MSSP)

Pros:

- Dedicated to securing your IT environment and cloud infrastructure, often featuring a specialized security operations center, a resource that many CSPs and MSPs may lack or outsource.

Cons:

- Primarily focused on security with limited knowledge in cloud and IT support services.

The type of provider you select will largely depend on your business's size and whether you have an existing internal IT department.

For small businesses with up to around 50 staff, an MSP is usually the first choice, given the limited scope for an internal IT resource.

Larger businesses with an internal IT department may commonly partner with MSPs, MSSPs, and CSPs for specialized services, a practice known as co-managed IT services.

MSPs are the most prevalent service providers and often bridge the gap in what CSPs and MSSPs offer. For example, if an MSP lacks a security operations center (SOC), this service might be outsourced to a third-party provider, ensuring clients receive the desired service through subcontracted solutions.

Navigating the type of provider you need shouldn't be a challenge. Contact us for assistance.

Chapter 4 - Criteria for Choosing an IT Provider

Now, let's dive into what you need to be aware of when choosing a Managed Service Provider (MSP).

Many managed service providers will tell you that they have the best customer service, the best personnel, or the best pricing.

These are all, of course, great attributes, but what really sets the good MSPs apart from the rest?

Firstly, let's examine exactly why you're thinking of changing IT providers – this usually comes down to one of the following reasons:

- The current IT provider is slow to react.
- Service levels are not what they used to be.
- The IT provider is perceived as not being forward-thinking.
- You've outgrown your current provider; they don't have the knowledge to help you transform.
- Price: the current provider has become too expensive; they charge for every little thing.
- Failed backups: you've lost data even though you're paying them for a backup service.
- IT security breach, cybersecurity attack or ransomware infection, data leak – you need someone more secure to manage your business IT infrastructure.

These are all common reasons why businesses switch to a new provider, but what should you look out for when shopping the market?

Expertise and Experience

Once you've narrowed down your selection of IT providers to a handful of companies, one of the first places to start investigating their experience is on LinkedIn. It's a wonderful tool that allows you to look up the employee size of the business.

How many people does the IT provider employ, and what's their experience? This can easily be researched by looking at the employees within a company and their work history. It will quickly give you a feel for the depth of knowledge and experience a company has.

Just remember, it's not all about size – a 5-person IT provider might be a better fit for you compared to a 50-person IT company.

Range of Services Offered

Your business is unique; it has different needs compared to other companies. As part of your research, you should be asking what services are covered in your managed service agreements.

Common IT services include:

- Managed IT Support
- Remote Monitoring & Management
- Account Management
- Backup Services
- Cloud and Physical Infrastructure Support and Service
- Hardware & Software Purchasing
- Internet Connectivity
- Network Management
- Security & Compliance
- Data Analytics, Data Capture
- AI Automation / Power Platform

Customer Support and Service Level Agreements (SLAs)

Almost all managed service providers will offer some level of service agreement. This is usually part of the term contract, and various service levels will be offered or come as standard.

It's important to find out what the standard service level offering is. For example, if someone in your company logs an IT support request, how long is a typical response? 15 minutes, 30 minutes, 3 hours?

Also, ask what the average response time is. Many of the SLAs in place have an autoresponder that acknowledges the support issue has been logged – this autoresponder keeps the MSP in line with the SLA, but it's important to understand the average response time by an IT support engineer.

Compliance and Security Standards

Cybersecurity and risk are becoming more common areas that MSPs cover. Many businesses now have cybersecurity insurance that will pay out if there is a data breach or some form of security incident resulting in loss to the business.

However, complying with the requirements of cybersecurity insurance is becoming more difficult every year. When shopping around for a new IT provider, it's good to find out if everything within your cybersecurity insurance will be covered by them. If not, what is the additional cost to maintain the correct level of compliance?

This can result in out-of-contract project work, which should be costed up prior to agreeing to a new managed service provider agreement.

Pricing Models and Cost-Effectiveness

Many IT providers will not give you a cost upfront – this is mainly due to the different needs businesses have for IT support and managed IT services.

It can be difficult to compare providers purely based on cost. Many businesses will mark down IT providers if they come in too cheap – a low-cost option is usually a reflection of the service level you will experience from the provider in the future.

Where there is a comparison, it's worth comparing or asking for the costs on a per-user basis. These can vary from \$100-\$500/month/user – a good starting point for how to compare the service offerings by a handful of providers.

Chapter 5 - Where to Find Your New IT Provider

There are many places you can look for a new IT provider – would you trust the internet for such a search, or are you better off talking with someone who knows the local marketplace well?

Remote

The first suggestion is to have a list of between 3-5 IT companies you plan to interview and provide a [request to tender].

More than 5, and you will not have enough time to interview all companies and make an informed decision – there may well be possibly too much information to sift through. On the other side of this, too few companies—you should aim for at least three IT providers as a minimum so you can get a good feeling for what's available to your business.

Word of mouth or internet?

If you are purely asking others if they know of a good IT provider, one of the main things to take into consideration is their experience with this provider. Is it firsthand, or are they passing on what someone else has mentioned?

Whatever the answer might be, take into account the size of the company and what type of company they've supported with IT. Your company may be completely different.

A small staff of 5 in a manufacturing firm has completely different needs and response requirements when it comes to IT than, for example, a large 50-person professional services firm – their worlds are night and day, and that recommended IT provider might be good for the manufacturing firm, but would they be able to deliver the same quality of service to your company, which may be much more demanding?

When it comes to research on the internet, there are many sources – you could do a general Google search and look at the reviews in your local area, or you could dive into more detail – looking for an IT company that deals specifically with your industry – you'll find that a lot of IT providers are generalists and take on any business.

If you do find a niche/industry-specific IT provider, one of the main questions you should have on your mind is their local physical presence – if there is one? If not, how do they deliver their IT support service when a physical onsite visit may be required? Do they contract this out, and if so, to whom? What type of service would you be receiving for the “in-person” visits? That can go a long way, especially as you're looking for a better service delivery experience in the first place.

It's also worth investigating any case studies, testimonials on the provider's website as well as background checks on LinkedIn to unearth years of experience these IT providers have. LinkedIn can give you a great understanding of how big an IT provider is and how many engineers with technical capability are on hand to support your business.

Chapter 6 - Evaluate Possible IT Providers

Picking the right Information Technology (IT) company can make or break the success of your business. There are so many choices that it can be hard to choose the best one.

But, if you use a structured approach to evaluate potential IT providers, you can speed up the process and end up with a good relationship that helps your business grow.

Here's how to carefully check out IT companies to make sure they can meet the wants of your business.

Some ways to research IT providers:

Collecting data is the first thing that needs to be done to evaluate IT companies. Here are some good ways to do research:

Reviews Sites

You can find a lot of information about IT providers on sites like Google, Trustpilot, and forums that are specific to your business. Read what people have said about how reliable, responsive, and good the service company is. Keep in mind that reviews can be helpful, but they might not always give you a true picture of what the company can do.

Case studies

Case studies give you an idea of how well the provider did on past jobs. They tell a story about how the provider dealt with certain problems and the answers they put in place. Find case studies that are related to the services you need and the business you're in.

Customer Reviews

Testimonials from present and past clients can be very helpful. From the client's point of view, they show what the service does well. If you can, get in touch with these clients directly to learn more about their experience with the company.

Questions You Should Ask Possible Providers

After you've done your homework, the next step is to talk to possible IT service providers. Things you should think about are these:

1. What kind of experience do you have with companies in my field?
2. Could you give me a full list of all the services you offer?
3. How do you decide how to prioritize talking to clients and managing projects?
4. What is your plan for keeping data safe and following the compliance laws?
5. Could you give me more information about how your prices are set?
6. How well do your services grow with my business?
7. What's your plan for dealing with downtime and service disruption?

The answers will tell you if they have the right skills, how they run their business, how they handle important issues like security, and how well they can change to meet your needs as they change.

Red Flags and Breaking the Deal

Good signals from the questions above are important in the selection process, it's also important to spot red flags. Some of these are:

Lack of Transparency: It's a red flag if a provider isn't open about their methods, prices, or team's qualifications.

Bad Communication: If it's hard to get in touch with the provider or if they take a long time to reply at first, it could mean that communication will be a problem in the future.

One-Size-Fits-All: Every business has different IT needs. If a provider offers a general solution without understanding your specific wants, they probably won't be able to give you good service.

Negative feedback trends: It's normal for people to complain once in a while, but getting negative feedback over and over again about the same problems can be a red flag.

No Clear SLA: Service Level Agreements (SLAs) are very important. Maybe you can't trust a service company that doesn't give you a clear SLA.

The Big Question

To find the right IT service, you need to do your research and make sure that their values and skills match your own. You can choose an IT service company that will not only meet your current needs but also help your business grow in the future if you do good research, ask the right questions, and watch out for warning signs.

In terms of research one very specific question you can ask is this: I want to align my IT infrastructure, software and hardware with my business goals. Can you give me a specific example of how you have helped one of your clients change from dealing with IT support issues to helping them achieve a business objective or goal?

If you get back a generalised answer dig deeper – what software was used, what hardware – what was the outcome for the customer?

Chapter 7 - Avoid These 3 Gotchas When Moving To A New IT Provider

With technology being so important to businesses these days, switching to a new IT service provider is a big job that needs to be carefully planned and carried out. There are some challenges that come with bringing on a new IT partner, but if you do it right, the process will go smoothly and safely.

Why knowledge transfer is important

A thorough transfer of information is the first step in the transition process. It is important to get a complete list of all the admin user accounts and passwords that can administer important services like Microsoft365, local domains, and network kit. This information is very for managing your IT equipment and needs to be sent to your new service provider in the safest and most private way possible. The way the data is transferred should meet the strictest data security standards, using encrypted routes to lower the chance of someone getting in without permission during the change.

Removal of RMM Software

Getting rid of the old service provider's Remote Monitoring and Management (RMM) software is an important step that is often missed. Your old IT company used this software, which they put on your laptops, desktops, and servers, to keep an eye on and handle your systems. Since your old provider is leaving, you need to get rid of this software to make room for the RMM solutions from your new provider. This process should be done in a way that is not only safe but also makes sure that your systems' security and performance are not harmed.

It is suggested that the old IT company give clear instructions and, if needed, passwords for getting rid of their software completely. This job shouldn't be done by force, but with careful planning to make sure that the change doesn't cause any problems or weak spots in service.

Moving from one antivirus program to another

The transfer plan must also include a careful replacement of antivirus software. Because antivirus software is important for keeping your IT system safe, it usually needs management rights to be uninstalled properly. You could end up with problems with your new provider's security systems or holes in your defence against online threats if you don't follow the right steps.

Setting the date for the transition

The time is another important part of the transition process. Once an agreement has been signed with the new provider, it is important to let the current IT service provider know when the switch is planned. If you don't want to break an agreement, this notice time should match the terms in your current contract.

There may be financial consequences for not giving the required notice time, such as having to pay for both the new and old service provider's costs. It is a good idea to go over the terms of the current contract, make sure everyone understands how to end it, and let everyone know about the transition plan early on.

Conclusion

To sum up, switching to a new IT service provider needs to be handled with care and accuracy. For the transition to go smoothly, it's important that knowledge is transferred smoothly, old management software and AV software uninstalled correctly.

Businesses need to take this change very seriously and make sure that every step is planned and carried out with security, continuity, and compliance in mind. By doing this, businesses can enjoy the benefits of their new IT relationship without having to deal with any "gotchas" during the transition.

Don't forget that, the success of your IT system depends on more than just technology. It also depends on the vision, strategy, and goals that your IT service provider brings to the table. So, the change is more than just a service; it's a way to make sure your business is ready for the future.

Chapter 8 - Potential Costs of IT Services: Key Considerations for Getting Accurate Quotes

When picking a new IT company, especially for a CEO or small business owner, it's important to think about how much the services might cost. Unexpected costs can catch many companies off guard, especially when they are changing things or growing. It is very important to know what to look for and how to negotiate service prices.

1. Service Scope: Core vs. Add-Ons

The difference between core IT services and add-ons is an important thing to think about. With some IT companies, services like network monitoring, security updates, and user help are all included in the price of the package. Others offer these as extra services that can be added on at extra cost. Whenever you compare quotes:

Check out what's included: Carefully compare the services that come with the base package to those that cost extra. For instance, basic troubleshooting might be covered by standard IT help, but more complicated technical problems that need more specialized knowledge might not.

Be aware of common Add-Ons: Know about common add-ons that may not come with base packages, like cybersecurity protection, data backup and recovery, and advanced system care.

2. Costs of scaling up and hiring new staff

When a company grows, its IT needs also grow. Getting new employees up to speed is a key process where costs can vary a lot. As you bring on new employees:

Getting new devices and setting them up: Getting new devices is supposed to cost money, but what about setting them up, keeping them safe, and using them?

Make sure that your IT provider tells you if setting up and deploying devices is part of their normal package or if it costs extra.

User Licenses and Software Access: If you hire new people, you may need to give them more software licenses or access rights. Find out if these fees are included in the original onboarding package or if you will have to pay extra for them. (Most licenses are additional but is there a cost associated with admin of purchase/activation?)

3. Terms of Service (SLAs) and Response Time

SLAs are important for making sure that service is good, but they can also change prices. Response times for fixing problems can be different depending on the amount of support, from basic to premium. When looking at quotes:

Read up on Response Tiers: Find out if you have to pay extra for faster answer times or better service. Do you know, for instance, if 24/7 help costs extra? Or, will fixing after hours cause the bills to go up?

How Much Does Incident Management Cost? Ask the IT company if incident management costs extra or if the contract covers a certain amount of incidents.

4. Changes to the infrastructure and integration

There may be extra costs when you make changes to your IT infrastructure, like moving systems to the cloud or adding new apps. When talking about contracts:

Fees for migration: Moving data and apps to a new platform can require a lot of hard work. Check to see if these migration fees are part of the original setup or if they are charged extra. Mostly commonly this will fall under project work and a day rate should be agreed upon.

Conclusion

When choosing a new IT provider, it's important to think carefully about the prices, especially when it comes to how scalable and flexible the services are. CEOs and small business owners can avoid unpleasant surprises and negotiate contracts that meet their needs by fully understanding the range of services that are offered, the costs of hiring new staff, the reaction times, and any changes to the infrastructure.

Chapter 9 - Making the Choice

It can be hard to figure out how to pick the best IT company for your business. You've narrowed down your choices after careful study and thought. After this comes the important part: making the final choice, which requires careful comparison, thought, and discussion. Here's how to handle the last part of your trip.

Finishing up your list of possible providers

You should now have a short list of possible IT service companies, each with their own strengths and offers. Start by going over your initial needs and goals again. Make sure that the IT plan and business goals you have still fit with what these providers offer.

Take a look at the cultural fit next. It's not enough for a provider to just sell you something; they should also be a partner who knows your business and can work well with your team. Take into account the opinions of different people in your company, including those who will be using the IT services on a regular basis.

Lastly, think about how likely it is that you will be together for a long time. Technology is always changing, so you need a service provider that can not only keep up with the latest trends but also see what's coming next.

The Way Decisions Are Made

A mix of data-driven research and gut feelings should be used to make decisions. Make a decision matrix that rates each company on things like cost, reputation, service quality, and ability to grow. With this method, you can see how the review is measured, which makes it easier to compare providers in an unbiased way.

Don't forget how strong your gut is. If a service seems good on paper but something about them doesn't feel right, you should look into why you might be hesitant.

Once you have made your choice, talk to the other candidates. If it's acceptable, give feedback. It's a small world, and keeping up professional relationships is always a good idea, especially if the wrong choice is made!

Focus on contracts and SLAs

Once a choice has been made, the next step is to start negotiating. You have the chance to lay the groundwork for a great partnership right now. Don't forget these tips:

Read and understand the small print. Contracts can be hard to understand and are full of legal words. It's very important to know what each sentence means for your business. Don't be afraid to talk to a lawyer/solicitor to get clear information and make sure your interests are protected.

State the Scope of the Work: The contract should make it clear what services will be given, when they will be delivered, and who is responsible for what. This makes sure there are no mistakes and makes it clear what is expected.

Service level agreements (SLAs): These spell out the amount of service you expect from the provider, such as guaranteed uptime, response times, and resolution times. Talk about SLAs that fit the operational needs of your business, and make sure that the penalties for not following them are fair and sensible.

Flexibility for the Future: As technology changes, so do your needs. Your contract should leave some room for these changes to happen. Add terms that talk about how to change the services offered, negotiate prices, and make solutions bigger or smaller.

Exit Strategy: No one starts a partnership thinking it will fail, but it's a good idea to spell out how to get out of it in the contract. This should include the rules for ending the contract, getting the data back, and transition services.

It can be hard to get what you want during negotiations while also keeping a good working relationship. You should go into the talks with clear goals, but you should also be ready to give in when it's best for the team.

The Bottom Line

Picking the right IT company is a key step in making sure your business is ready for the future. Putting together your list ahead of time, using an organized way to make decisions, and paying close attention to the details during negotiations will help your company use technology to grow and succeed.

Trust your gut, your team, and the study you've done. Because you did your research, you will be able to form a good relationship that will help your business for many years.

Chapter 10 - IT Support Contracts What To Avoid

After carefully reviewing the market and comparing potential IT providers to your current managed service provider, you're almost ready to sign a new IT support contract. But before putting pen to paper, it's crucial to thoroughly examine the details beyond just pricing.

Here are three things to confirm with the new provider before finalizing your contract:

1. Contract Length & Termination

This is a critical consideration because each IT provider approaches contract terms differently. The most common contract length is typically 36 months. IT services and solutions tend to be "sticky" and challenging to switch, as changing providers requires significant work. For instance, IT providers often use specialized software like RMM (remote monitoring and management) to deliver quick fixes, monitor devices, and provide remote support. Transitioning to a new provider means replacing this software across all devices, which is labor-intensive and time-consuming.

Some providers offer shorter contracts or no contracts at all, but this carries risks like unpredictable price increases. While a short-term agreement may seem appealing, it could lead to overpaying in the long run.

2. Who's Liable If You Get Hacked?

Liability is a sensitive issue, especially for those who have experienced hacks before. Managed service providers usually shift the risk to the businesses they serve, which is common practice. To illustrate, you wouldn't expect a fire extinguisher company to cover damages after a fire simply because you bought their products. Similarly, IT providers aren't typically liable for breaches. They should work according to best security practices and offer tools and solutions to help reduce your risk.

3. Intellectual Property

IT providers often assist clients in automating manual processes, which takes time and resources to develop and implement. Depending on the specific process, automation could provide a significant competitive advantage. So, it's important to clarify who owns the rights to these automated processes after implementation. This is a key negotiation point that can affect your strategic advantage.

When navigating these potential contract pitfalls, negotiation plays a pivotal role. Finding a new IT provider involves more than just assessing their technology, capabilities, and pricing. Consider the people behind the company—are they aligned with your values and vision? Trust your instincts because relationships matter, in both life and business.

Chapter 11 - Future-Proofing Your IT Partnership

It's easy to focus on the technology when choosing a new provider. You approach them with a list of issues related to your current provider, such as slow response times, limited support, or perhaps a lack of communication.

The new provider may then quote you a similar service along with a unique offering that stands out compared to others, but it's often easy to get lost in the details.

Remember that the technology your new IT provider manages in your business must align with the business's goals and strategy.

To assist with this, here are three things to get right when initiating a relationship with your new IT provider:

1. Set quarterly account review meetings.

Many IT providers might use this as an opportunity to upsell other services they offer, so be aware of this. Then, there are providers who don't even review the performance of how they are managing your account on a regular basis.

Ensure you schedule quarterly dates in the diary to meet with your new provider.

The primary focus should initially be on creating a technology roadmap – this will help prioritize what are the easy wins for the business when it comes to technology.

Utilizing tools like the action priority matrix to develop the technology roadmap will be a significant step in the right direction and help make the quarterly meetings productive.

2. Joint innovation/learning sessions.

Depending on resources and agreements with your new IT provider, it's worth discussing what types of training/learning sessions they could provide.

This not only helps raise awareness of issues like cybersecurity threats but also serves as an important feedback mechanism where the workforce can voice opinions to help prioritize and focus within the technology roadmap.

Tech Talks on new and upcoming Microsoft features such as the latest versions of Outlook or Teams are just some examples of topics that can be covered in these sessions.

3. Risk Management & Compliance

Not all IT providers will be inclined to assist with this, but it's increasingly important in most businesses due to cybersecurity threats and their impact on risk management.

A list of risks should be maintained within the business, including a section dedicated to IT, data, and cybersecurity compliance. Your IT provider is crucial in keeping this risk register updated and should regularly review it at quarterly meetings.

Chapter 12 – Bonus: Developing a Technology Roadmap

One of the main reasons many businesses change IT providers is because they want an upgrade to the service delivery experience.

This comes in many forms, and all IT providers are different in how they'll give you a better experience than your current IT provider.

A key piece of this upgraded experience, and something that usually is not advertised or quoted as part of an IT service provider's service, is how they are going to get you from point A in your business's technology maturity to point B.

Continual improvement

Continual improvement is the name of the game and comes in different forms—it is all about the experience you receive from the service delivery.

One of the main items to focus on when it comes to your business's technology maturity and continual improvement is a quarterly account review. These come as standard, but what may not be standard is the technology roadmap.

Working and focusing on a technology roadmap at the start of a new partnership and at these quarterly meetings can have a big impact over time on the running of your business and its technology maturity.

The question you might have now is what exactly is a technology roadmap and how do we build one for our business?

The roadmap is basically a fancy way of prioritizing what needs to be done in your business to raise the technology maturity of your business.

This maturity will help drive efficiencies and could lead to digital transformative opportunities for the company.

The checklist will have items that are easy and quick to deliver with minimal effort. It will also have items that are quick to deliver but will require no effort, as well as other items that will take time and resources and drive significant changes. Finally, there will be items that will take time and resources but will drive minimal change.

Prioritizing roadmap items

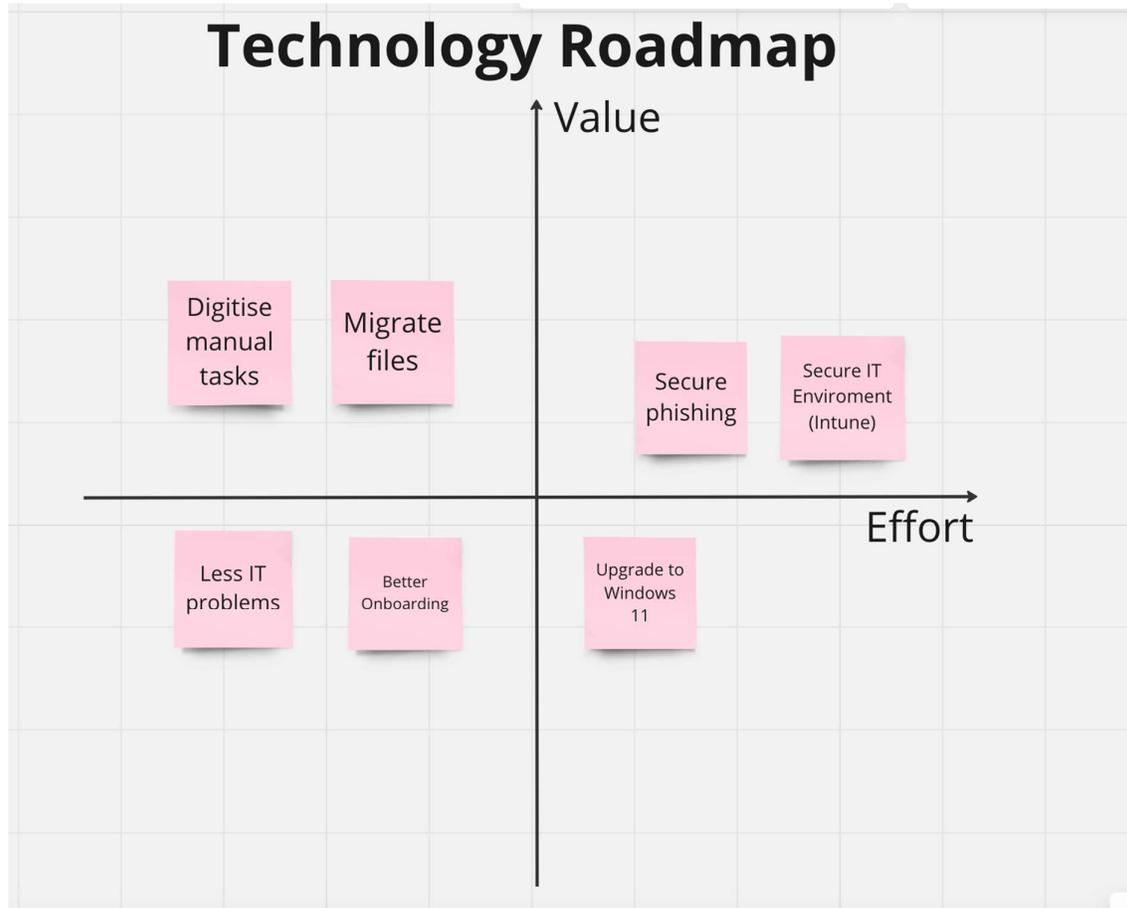
How we prioritize all these items is by using a matrix diagram (see Figure 1).

The new IT provider will be able to identify technology opportunities, and I'm sure you'll also have a list of your own tech improvements you'd like to see in the business—using the matrix, you'll be able to identify exactly what tasks to prioritize first and what tasks form longer-term projects that can be part of the quarterly account reviews.

Here's our example list that both the new IT provider has prescribed as part of an audit and the business's own list of tech improvements and quick wins:

- Faster internet in the office (will require a new internet line and the installation of a new network switch and access points)
- More secure IT so we don't get as many phishing emails (Deployment of an email phishing solution to complement default M365 protection)
- Better onboarding experience for new staff (IT onboarding form and new process development with HR for rapid deployment of devices to new staff)
- More secure IT environment to meet new compliance standards (Azure join all devices and enrolment of Intune, application of conditional access policies)
- Digitalization of manual over-the-phone applications (Build of new online forms with the sales team)
- Fewer IT problems (Identify issues in the business that can be permanently fixed without the need for a temporary band-aid)
- Upgrade of laptops to Windows 11 (Audit of hardware estate and device upgrade/purchase where required)
- Files better organized (decommission file server and migrate all files to SharePoint aligning to departmental structure)

Priority Matrix



As you can see from the priority matrix we can easily understand what tasks we can complete first, these are our quick wins – take minimal effort and drive some big changes in our current IT infrastructure.

The top right quadrant are bigger projects that will deliver value and the bottom right are tasks that would come down further on the priority list as there's effort involved and not a lot of value for the business in return – certainly with Windows 11 it might be a great product but it's not going to massively change the way you work currently if you have a modern PC.

If you want further information on how we can help deliver a technology roadmap for your business, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

If you're ready to choose an IT provider or need help, learn how Zircuit Solutions Limited is here to help. Contact us today at 484-702-2956 or at zircuitsolutions.com to find out how we can help your business.