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Conversational Professional Services for IT Buyers

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Learn about:

- The key benefits of using a managed service provider
- How to choose the right managed service provider for your business

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Conversational Professional Services for the IT Buyer (Mini Edition)

by Derek Smith

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The “Conversational” Method

We have two objectives when we create a “Conversational” book. First, to make sure it’s written in a conversational tone so that it’s fun and easy to read. Second, to make sure you, the reader, can immediately take what you read and include it into your own conversations (personal or business-focused) with confidence.

“Geek in the Mirror” Boxes

We infuse humor and insight into our books through both cartoons and light banter from the author. When you see one of these boxes it’s the author stepping outside the dialog to speak directly to you. It might be an anecdote; it might be a personal experience.



Within these boxes I can share just about anything on the subject at hand. Read 'em!

So, You're Thinking of Hiring an MSP?



As an IT manager and user of managed services, other industry professionals often ask me how I choose my service providers. Well, my organization has a process for doing so, and I have been using managed service providers for years now. Still, I thought it would be interesting to delve deeper into this subject to answer this question for myself and

those of you who are reading this guide and have the same question.

When buying IT managed services, business leaders need to identify IT requirements that will enable the business, align IT with business objectives, evaluate each potential provider's capabilities, and assess the return on investment from an IT services partner.

Considering the complex and ever-changing landscape of IT managed services, I have designed this guide to provide decision-makers with a starting point. Business leaders should consider several essential areas when deciding whether to engage a managed services provider (MSP) for some or all their IT needs, and I cover them here.

Even for experienced individuals like myself, evaluating IT managed services can be complicated and challenging. This guide will help you navigate the decision-making process when considering any agreement with a managed service provider.



Although I may not answer every question you have about IT managed services, I will provide you with a framework for asking some of the right questions to ensure you're making the best IT outsourcing decision for your business.

What do Managed Service Providers Do Anyway?

Now, I understand that most of you reading this guide are already in the industry, as I am. But just in case we need to level-set, let's begin by defining what I mean by managed services. A managed services provider is an organization that oversees services for another organization. Basically, in this case they can take care of all your IT needs.

The term 'managed services' seems to be used to describe several things in the IT arena currently. This can lead to confusion as to what true IT managed

services are. As a technology buyer, this may make it difficult for you to understand what an MSP does, have an informed conversation with a potential provider, or decide what is best for your business's IT needs.

So, let's clarify the definition. I believe the central principle of an IT managed services model is a provider-customer relationship based on a transparent contract with relevant service level agreements (SLAs). The IT managed services model is a form of outsourcing that involves contracting with a third-party MSP. The MSP will manage (on your behalf) one or more of your company's IT services, such as the help desk, data center, networking, security, end-user computing, device management, or managing your virtual machines, to name but a few.

The MSP is then tasked with monitoring, updating, and managing your IT services as part of a contractual agreement over a fixed period. This SLA usually covers performance expectations and metrics such as 24/7 support, resolution times for common issues, and steps for remediation and

remuneration should something go wrong, or a service not be delivered to your standard.

In many cases, the decision to use managed IT services can be as simple as a lack of in-house staff in the IT department. Suppose your business has less than 500 employees. In that case, you will likely employ a minimum number of IT staff, thereafter relying on 'technically savvy' employees to take on ad hoc IT roles as and when required. As your business grows or becomes more complex, this approach is highly unlikely to work over the long-term requiring you to either hire more people to do the job or seek help from a managed services provider.

Nowadays, IT is considered an indispensable part of any business. It will be irresponsible to even operate a business without thinking about IT.

But I get it. IT can be intimidating. The blinking lights, the tech jargon, even the new devices all seem like something hard to understand. That is why I believe the best solution for most businesses out there is to hire somebody to take care of all their IT needs.

A good IT partner can focus on what they do best and let the techy people manage the ones and zeroes. One such partnership can come in the form of Managed IT Services. I also seek a partner that I can trust and who has a history of dependability, is reliable and has consistently performed above expectations.



I consider my MSPs as trusted partners and advisors who function as vital members of my IT problem-solving teams.

Briefly, as stated before, managed IT services is the practice of hiring a third party to oversee all or some of your IT concerns for your business. An MSP can handle everything from VoIP to cybersecurity. The question is, are Managed IT Services for you? Why should you get it? What exact functions should you be expecting to be covered?

Let's find out. We'll start by looking at some of the benefits of using an MSP.

11 Benefits of a Managed Service Provider

So now that you have a general understanding of what a managed services provider is let's look at some benefits of hiring an MSP. Here are the 11 things they do for me and can do for you.

1. Focus on What Your Business Needs

Allowing an MSP to maintain and monitor your technology frees up time for you to focus on your business goals and initiatives.

2. Be Able to Predict Costs

Managed services provide me with predictable monthly costs that make planning my budget for technology costs easier.

3. Gain Peace of Mind

My MSPs provide me with the peace of mind that my IT environment is well maintained, and as a bonus, I don't have to worry about them calling in sick!

4. Reduced Costs

I just don't have enough employees to get the job done. My MSPs provide me access to experienced IT staff with various skills and certifications without the cost of full-time employees.

5. Reduced Risk

With expert industry knowledge, my MSPs help me to manage risk expertly. Using my MSPs, I can tweak things as needed. Suppose new compliance or regulatory changes require my organization to work differently. In that case, my MSP provides me with trained staff to do so. If a security risk targets my organization, I don't have to duck and cover; my MSP handles my IT needs and keeps me ahead of the curve. They are always ready with the right solutions. This is all the kind of work carried out in-house by my MSPs.

6. Decreased Device Downtime

My MSPs are proactive, identifying and solving potential issues before they cause significant downtime.

7. Increased Security

My MSPs keep up with industry best practices regarding security, ensuring that my sensitive information is secure and that I comply with standards.

8. Increased Productivity

I have limited staff, so my MSPs frees up my team to work on other strategic projects that further my core objectives.

9. Access to Advanced Technology

When IT professionals work for an MSP, they need to know all of the latest changes in their industry. To stay competitive, they need to have whatever their customers want. This means that any new technology they implement will also comply with my needs. Technology changes quickly, and it's difficult for me to always keep up with the latest technology advancements. My MSPs ensure that my systems are up to date and secure. They also have the resources and knowledge to implement new technology right when I need it.

10. An Extension of Your Business

Overall, my MSPs have become an extension of my business. They provide me with a professional sounding board to help me work through my IT issues. Sometimes my in-house staff don't have the answers I need, but I can work with my provider experts who don't mince words and are not bothered by office politics. They provide me with the facts about my current situation. They also ease my day-to-day management while equipping my organization for future growth. They understand my business, help me reach my goals, and always look for opportunities that will benefit my organization. They can do the same for you.

11. Respond to My Needs Faster

My organization serves millions of customers, and they don't want to wait for anything. If there's a new solution to make my organization run more efficiently, I need to have it. My MSPs can offer me everything I need to respond to my customers' demands right now.

So those are some of the benefits that an MSP can provide. When you're looking to save money, spending it on MSPs is one of your best bets. Paying for just the services you need on an *a la carte* basis is much cheaper than recruiting and training in-house resources. But there is still the question, What's next? How do I find an MSP with whom I can depend, trust, and work?



Finding the right MSP is crucial as whoever you choose will work very closely with you as a partner. You want an MSP that will be responsive and communicative, work well with you, and understand your needs.

Continue reading to learn just how to make the proper selection.

How can you select the right MSP?

Selecting the right MSP can be overly complicated and emotional if you don't approach it correctly. I

believe some essential considerations for choosing your MSP are:

- What type of customer service do they have?
- What are their specific product and service offerings?
- What kind of organization and culture do they have, and is it compatible with yours?
- Do they employ sound security practices?
- How is their account management?
- Are their employees trained and certified, and do they stay current in their training?

I will get back to these in a moment, but first, I want to look at some features you should look for in your MSP of choice.

Scope of Work

What kind of services does your managed service provider offer? What is their specialty?

Industry Expertise

What is the MSP's industry focus? Do they specifically focus on your industry? Focusing on your industry will enable them to solve your technical problems faster and more effectively.

24/7/365 Support

Some managed service providers offer business hours support, while others provide around-the-clock monitoring and maintenance of your technology. You'll want to choose an MSP who can meet your specific needs.

Cybersecurity Services

If you have particular security requirements, make your MSP help you manage your security needs.

Cloud Solutions

If you have adopted the cloud, as my organization has, make sure your MSP has solutions to assist you safely and effectively.

Training

This is probably one of the most crucial areas on which to focus. Be it the service desk agents, developers, or IT professionals, your MSP should have a deep roster of certified IT experts, especially in technologies and issues relevant to your business. The better trained their employees are, the more effective they will be at maintaining your company's managed services.

Check to see if their employees are certified in the areas where they provide MSP services. Certifications can help you to validate an MSP's credibility quickly. You must ensure that you can trust your MSP partners. This is easily accomplished by ensuring all partners are certified and their certifications are up to date and audited regularly.



Certification is especially when selecting larger MSPs (i.e. a company 15.000 employees plus) you need to ensure that the certified people work on your services, because if they are in a different group they might not help at all.

While trust can be established over time by working directly with an MSP, certifications can tell you at a glance whether your potential vendors are competent in the areas that are important to your business. Their certifications are verifiable and standardized and are an excellent way for an MSP to validate that they possess knowledge and expertise in areas of relevance to you. Which should also include certifications for all partners.

OK, so back to those five crucial areas I mentioned before. As you can probably already tell from above, I like lists as they make things so much easier to understand and follow, so here is another one with

nine steps to help you select the right MSP for your business.

1. Customer Service

Every MSP claims to have excellent customer service. A good MSP tracks its metrics and can easily provide them to you. You should review them and even check out social media reviews, and customer testimonials. They provide important insight into the reputation of the MSP.

2. Service Level Agreement

A Service Level Agreement (SLA) is a contractual commitment by the MSP to meet specific service metrics. Their services contract must include a clearly defined SLA outlining such things as.

- What services are included in the SLA?
- What happens if there is a breach or attempted breach?
- How do you report a problem or request service?

- What are the MSP's support hours and definition of how requests submitted outside of the support hours are handled?
- What are your responsibilities to the MSP?
- What are the MSP's response and resolution times?



An SLA should define how quickly you'll receive a response to your request for service and how quickly the MSP will resolve the issue. As well as what happens in the event that the issue is outside of the control of the MSP.

3. Service hours

You cannot measure what is not defined. The SLA defines the MSP's commitment to service. You want to see how frequently they meet or exceed their commitments. Look for such things as:

- The number of service requests
- Average customer satisfaction score
- Average phone hold time
- Percent of service requests resolved within the SLA time frame

4. Product and service offerings

Depending on what you require, you must precisely understand what services are available, as well as which services are included in your contract, including 24/7 coverage.

5. Remote and on-site support

Your MSPs should offer some type of remote support capability. Choose an MSP with a defined process for dealing with and alleviating issues.

6. Organization, culture, and Leadership structure

A well-managed MSP is a partner to your business. They engage with your executives in strategic business decisions. Their support team, at some

point, will communicate with nearly every employee in your company. To build the best partnership with an MSP, get to know their organizational structure and culture and ensure it aligns with your company culture. They need a clear organizational structure and multiple leaders authorized to make decisions.

7. Security Practices

Like you, MSPs are a target for cyberattacks. They must be even more diligent about security than the average business. It would be best to work with an MSP who takes their own cybersecurity as seriously as you do yours. Additionally, you should ask your MSP how do they protect their customers from one another.

8. Account Management

The most significant value a managed service provider brings to the table is not technical; it's strategic. Your MSP's approach to account management plays an important role in the benefits you'll get out of the partnership. Account managers may have different titles in different MSPs. They might be called consultants, account managers,

success managers, or any combination of those terms. No matter what title they have, be sure your MSP assigns you a dedicated, strategic contact.

9. Strategic Consulting

Your account manager is your partner and point of contact for high-level discussions. They may serve as your strategic consultant or work with other team members to facilitate various consulting services. Be sure you are comfortable with them and see them as someone you can build a trusted relationship with. Your account manager is your partner. They must advocate on your behalf to other players within your business and within the MSP. It's their responsibility to mitigate any service issues with their service team and manage the planning phases of any IT projects.

The Big Takeaways

Well, that's it folks. I have shared lots of information and tips on how you can choose the best MSP to fit your needs in a simple and actionable format.

Overall, managed service providers focus on proactive management and strategy to help you prevent problems and align your technology with your long-term business goals. Choosing an MSP may seem daunting with all the options out there.

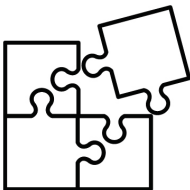
Ultimately the best MSP for your business will focus on solutions tailored to your needs. Whether you need industry-specific compliance services or high-level cybersecurity, your MSP should be able to address your needs and leave you at ease.

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Considering the complex and ever-changing landscape of IT managed services, this book provides decision-makers with a starting point. It covers the essential areas business leaders should look at when deciding whether to engage a managed service provider (MSP) for some or all their IT needs.



About Derek A. Smith

With over 30 years in the security industry, Derek A. Smith is a former government agent, cybersecurity SME, published author, and cyber security analyst for several TV news stations.



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