

White Paper

How to choose a Managed Services Provider: A 20 point checklist to choosing the right MSP for your business



Managed services span a broad spectrum of IT capabilities and not only offer companies of all sizes access to IT functions, infrastructure and apps that might otherwise be unaffordable, but also allow businesses to focus on business-critical and strategic aspects rather than managing daily IT tasks.

Managed services offer the scalability, flexibility, agility and technological expertise that allows businesses to concentrate solely on reacting quickly to market demand, and ultimately on growth and innovation. Meeting user demand, controlling risk and providing innovation are other benefits.

So choosing the right managed services provider (MSP) for your business is one of the most important decisions your company can make. Do they have the expertise to support and boost your business? Are they reliable, resilient and can they provide cutting-edge IT infrastructure and tools that can take your business to the next level?

In essence, the success of your chosen MSP is intertwined with the success of your own company.

The following white paper outlines a 20-point checklist to help you make the right decision when choosing a MSP.

1

HOW LONG HAS THE COMPANY BEEN IN BUSINESS?

The first question to ask is: How long has the MSP been operating? If you are a young or growing company, it's not a good idea to trust your IT function, or parts thereof, to a new MSP with relatively little experience and few customer references. In the case of a SMB, you should be looking for expertise and experience from your MSP and be able to trust them to guide you through the technology maze, rather than the other way around.

2

DO THEY PASS THE CREDIT CHECK?

Any historical issues with insolvency, either with the MSP itself or any of its directors, should immediately raise a red flag. It is essential to check financials and credit worthiness in order to minimise risk for your business.

In line with the UK Government's commitment to providing free data about businesses, Companies House has made all public data held on the UK register of companies available free of charge, so can be your first port of call for checking the basic registration and financials of your chosen MSP.

Likewise Experian Business Express Credit Reports provide instant information about UK businesses, and can even predict business risk and failure within the next 12 months.

A host of free online services can also provide free credit check information, including cash, net worth, current and total liabilities, as well as information on the company directors.



Aztech IT can say 'yes' to every item on this 20-point checklist. So if you would like to discuss your managed services requirements, or find out how we can help you, then please get in touch.

3 ARE THEY TRANSPARENT?

You do not want to expose your own business to risk with a new MSP, particularly if they are hiding debt or any other financial issues from you. For public companies it is easy to find out how they perform, by checking filings and records at Companies House, and many online sources. For private companies, it's a bit more difficult. It may be a case of approaching the MSP directly. Ask if they are willing to share historical financial performance data with you. Is their revenue growing? What about the numbers of customers? Are they willing to answer all your questions about their finances, future plans, customers, and so on?

4 ARE THEY ABLE TO GROW WITH YOUR COMPANY?

If you are expecting the relationship to be a long one, it is essential to find out if the growth plans of your chosen MSP match those of your own business. What does their historical growth plan look like – have they consistently grown? Do they have a future growth roadmap? How many customers can they serve currently, and how do they see that changing over the next 12, 24 and 48 months? What about IT infrastructure – does your MSP have plans to invest in order to comfortably accommodate all these new customers? How quickly have they grown, in terms of revenue, staff, IT infrastructure, customers, and so on. It is important to choose a MSP that can match the growth plans for your own company, otherwise you will have to go through the same process if you outgrow your original MSP.

5 ARE THEY ISO9001 REGISTERED?

ISO9001 is a certified quality management system (QMS) for organisations who want to prove their ability to consistently provide products and services that meet the needs of their customers and other relevant stakeholders.

This standard is based on a number of quality management principles including a strong customer focus, the motivation and implication of top management, the process approach and continual improvement. ISO9001 certification can be provided by an independent certification body, so ask your MSP if they are certified to ISO9001:2015, and ask to see the certificate.

6 CAN YOU VIST THEIR OFFICES TO SEE THEIR OPERATION?

Visiting the premises of your preferred MSP can tell you a lot about the way the company, and its staff and directors, operate. An MSP that avoids your requests to a visit may be hiding something. If you are invited to visit, notice your first impression – is it good? Are staff at all levels personable, helpful, engaged and knowledgeable? Are they willing to show you everywhere on premise, or are there locations they try to avoid showing you? Ask why.

7 WILL THE DIRECTORS OF THE COMPANY MEET WITH YOU?

It shows that the directors of the MSP value your custom if they are willing to make time for you, and will give a reasonable indication of the ethos of the company as a whole. At the same time, it will give you an opportunity to ask them any questions you might have about issues or concerns, as well as their plans for future growth, investment in IT infrastructure, and so on.



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8 COULD YOU HAVE A WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM?

Of course, while the MSP's resources and professionalism are vital, you will rely on them, and often communicate with them on a daily basis. So, like outsourcing, it's a business relationship, but with a reliance on daily human interaction. Ask to meet the person(s) that you will be dealing with on a regular basis at the MSP to ensure that you can build a healthy professional relationship.

9 WHAT INVESTMENT HAVE THEY MADE IN THEIR SUPPORT TOOLS AND IT INFRASTRUCTURE?

At the end of the day, the decision is a technology one. Can your MSP provide the appropriate level of support and IT infrastructure for your needs? For example, do they replicate your data and/or servers to ensure business continuity in the face of unforeseen circumstances? If so, where and how often?

Can they offer the right set of tools to enable your business goals? What about their plans for future investment? What about peaks and troughs in demand – if your company requires periods of high application demand, for example, can the MSP's existing infrastructure handle that? And, if that peak coincides with peaks in other customers' demands, is their setup scalable, resilient and secure enough to handle that? If your MSP cannot tell you clearly what they offer now, and why, and what they plan to offer in the future, then it could be that the company does not have its 'finger on the pulse'.

10 WHAT INTERNAL SLA'S DOES THE MSP HAVE IN PLACE?

Your MSP must have internal SLAs that define the level of service they can provide for you, the customer. Many will have a standard SLA template, so ask to see contract. An SLA clearly defines the MSP can, or is willing to, provide. An SLA might cover precise details of: service type, for example web hosting, server space or disaster recovery; problem reporting, who you should contact in the event of a problem; how quickly they can restore a downed server or app; support hours, what are normal hours, and what happens outside this time; your own responsibilities, for example, keeping up to date on virus protection; confidential and sensitive data, such as how long will document be kept, how will they keep confidential information secure, and what happens to the data at the end of the contract?

Another important point is to ask if the MSP verifies that they are meeting their SLAs for other customers, how often are they tested, and who verifies them – are they internally verified or by an independent external party? Again, ask to see official documents.

11 DO THEY PROVIDE REPORTING?

Whether it's disaster recovery or server performance, ask your MSP if they provide a reporting service so that you can see exactly how your managed IT services are performing. This is essential not only for SLA performance levels, but also for flagging up potential problems, so that you and the MSP can work together to make the necessary changes and avoid unexpected issues in future.

12 CAN THEY PROVIDE A RANGE OF REFERENCE CUSTOMERS?

Can the MSP provide a reasonable range of customer references? What kind of companies? Are they a similar size to yours; in the same vertical? You need to know that they have experience of dealing with businesses similar to your own. Are they willing to provide references, and let you speak to some of their other customers?

13 DO THEY OUTSOURCE?

If the MSP outsources, it is essential to understand exactly what functions are managed by the external party. It's almost as important as picking the MSP itself, as you will need to ask the same questions of the outsourcing company as your MSP. What resources does it have? How many customers? What are its SLAs?



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14 HOW MANY STAFF DOES YOUR MSP HAVE?

The last thing that you want from your MSP is for it to be understaffed. You are entrusting a large portion of the success of your company to your MSP, so it is essential to know that they have the appropriate level of staff, not only to manage daily tasks, but also to respond to issues if they arise. Understaffing leads to low morale and ultimately mistakes. So ensure that your MSP has enough cover to meet the SLAs already outlined.

15 IS THERE ENOUGH RESOURCE?

Your MSP has to be able to meet not only yours, but also the needs of multiple customers, and their individual peaks and troughs in demand. Do they have sufficient IT infrastructure and computing power? Ask how many servers they have, are they mirrored elsewhere? Of course, if they perform routine testing as already outlined, the MSP should be able to show you performance levels, and how they handle strong peaks in demand, whether for server space, apps, computing power, storage, and so on, as well as their business continuity capabilities.

16 WHAT IS THEIR EMPLOYMENT PROCESS?

How does the MSP go about employing additional staff? Their policy should be to employ the best, rather than the cheapest. Where do they recruit from? Do they prefer pre-qualified and experienced staff, or do they prefer to train staff themselves? Do they have an on-going training and/or certification program in place for their staff? What about criminal records checking? If you are placing sensitive data in the hands of the MSP, it is vital that you can trust them.

17 ARE THEIR STAFF PERSONABLE?

Again, you will be dealing with your MSP on a daily basis, so it goes without saying that a good working relationship with the person or persons responsible for your service provision can help to smooth the business relationship and, ultimately, help you to work together to achieve mutual success.

18 WHAT HOURS OF WORK IS THE HELPDESK OPEN?

If something unexpected occurs, you need to know exactly who you can call, and when. What are their working hours, and just as important, is there someone on-call on the helpdesk on evenings and/or weekends? Your MSP should have someone that you can contact in an emergency on a 24/7 basis.

19 ARE STAFF TRAINED AND ACCREDITED FOR THE LATEST TECHNOLOGIES?

Technology moves quickly. You need to be able to rely on your MSP to provide the most up-to-date technologies, and to ensure that its staff are fully trained and certified on an on-going basis. It is vital that your MSP has its finger on the pulse to allow your business to be flexible and agile, and to respond to market changes and trends, rapidly. Also find out, if their staff gain accreditation? Where from? On a regular basis? Do they have a formal structure in place?

20 ASK FOR A FREE AUDIT

Your MSP should value your custom from the outset. A good MSP will understand that mutual success is the goal. By providing a free IT audit at the start of the relationship, the MSP not only gets an idea of your business, and its resources, but can also identify areas that need improvement that you may have missed. A free IT audit can help to build the platform for a mutually successful partnership.