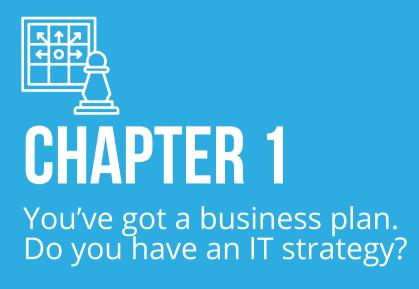# I.T. SERVICES BUYER'S GUIDE

Your Guide to Evaluating Your Current and Future IT Partners

I.T. SERVICES BUYER'S GUIDE

CHAPTER 1

You've got a business plan.
Do you have an IT strategy?

When did you last update your IT strategy?

If you haven't considered having an IT strategy, or if it hasn't been on your mind in recent years, **now is the perfect time to start developing one.**

Whether your business relies on basic technology like a cash register or has a sophisticated network across multiple locations, a well-planned IT strategy can be a game-changer. It serves as the **foundation for business growth and can determine whether your business merely survives uncertain times or thrives through them.**

Your IT strategy should align seamlessly with your business plan, outlining how your technology will drive progress toward your goals. It should encompass both short and long-term objectives while remaining adaptable to change.

Despite being labeled as an IT strategy, it's not solely about technology. While you'll have plans for current and future tech, the strategy primarily revolves around your business and how technology facilitates achieving your objectives effortlessly.

A practical starting point is evaluating your existing IT infrastructure. Identify what's functioning well and areas that could use improvement. **Consider whether your technology can scale with your business** growth or if you'll need to explore new software, networks, or phone systems.

Engage with your team to gather insights on what works and what could be enhanced. Are there aspects of your infrastructure causing hindrances? Could time be saved by switching to different software or enabling better communication between applications?

When collaborating with an IT support partner, rely on their expertise to pinpoint suitable hardware and software. **They should tailor recommendations based on your workflow and anticipated changes.** Additionally, they can identify potential issues and propose streamlined solutions you might have overlooked.

Incorporating a technology roadmap into your strategy aids in budgeting and anticipates future investments. This helps avoid unexpected costs and unanticipated invoices that weren't factored into your budget.

While creating an IT strategy might seem daunting, especially if done independently, if you're working with an IT support partner, this is an aspect they should actively contribute to and guide you through.

Now, more than ever, it's crucial to justify every expense and ensure that each investment contributes significantly to your business. Seeking value for money in every endeavor is paramount.

Establish a set of metrics to gauge the effectiveness of your infrastructure. While it's great if your team appreciates a particular system, true success lies in obtaining a return on investment. If the desired outcomes aren't being achieved, it might not be working as effectively as perceived.

Regular strategic reviews, preferably every six months, should involve your IT support partner. Assess what's going well and identify areas taking longer than desired. Making minor adjustments during these reviews can realign your path toward achieving business goals.

Emphasizing the importance of an IT support partner over a mere company or provider is intentional. Consider the analogy of an office building – traditional IT support companies act like cleaners, addressing issues as they arise. In contrast, providers position themselves as facilities managers, proactively thinking and planning. Similar to scheduling maintenance for a building, they strive to prevent issues before they escalate.

An IT support partner takes a proactive stance, conducting background work to prevent potential problems. While challenges are inevitable in the fast-paced realm of technology, a proactive approach minimizes the need for extensive clean-up compared to reactive IT support companies.

In essence, envision an ongoing collaboration that goes beyond addressing issues; it involves proactive planning and prevention, ensuring a smoother IT operation for your business.

Ideally, what an IT partner should do for their clients is to create ongoing technology roadmaps that covers:

- **What will be happening over the next 2 to 3 years**

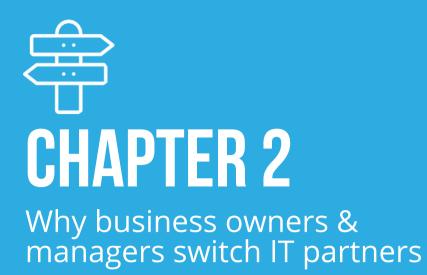- **What technological investments you need to make**

There should be no surprises, ever. It's all planned and regular strategic reviews will help to correct course with the inevitability of change.

An IT roadmap is like a strategic guide for your business's tech journey. It lays out a clear path, helping you navigate through challenges and make informed decisions. Imagine it as a dynamic blueprint that not only anticipates potential roadblocks but also identifies opportunities for growth.

One significant advantage is its ability to prioritize investments. By mapping out your technology plans, you can discern what's crucial for your business at any given time. If unexpected issues arise, the roadmap allows you to identify areas that can be delayed without derailing your entire strategy.

Furthermore, the roadmap fosters financial agility. It enables you to evaluate your budget in real-time, allowing adjustments based on your financial standing. If you're ahead financially, certain initiatives can be brought forward, contributing to a more flexible and responsive approach.

Crucially, an IT roadmap thrives on partnership. It's not just a document; it symbolizes a deep understanding of your business. This shared insight makes collaboration smoother, as your IT support team, intimately acquainted with your goals and challenges, can proactively assist you on your tech journey. In essence, an IT roadmap is your business's tech-savvy ally, guiding you through the intricacies of the digital landscape while aligning seamlessly with your overall business strategy.

CHAPTER 2

Why business owners &
managers switch IT partners

Many businesses I've spoken to express dissatisfaction with their current IT support provider.

These are the top 10 reasons I've heard people say they want to switch to a new IT support partner:

REASON TO SWITCH 1)
YOU'RE NOT SEEING BUSINESS RESULTS

Getting the most out of your investment is key, especially right now. It's essential to quickly grasp how much effort your IT partner is putting in and what value it's adding to your business.

A good IT support partner doesn't just hand you a detailed IT plan for the short and long term—they also provide you with practical metrics to gauge the results.

These metrics should directly relate to your business and not be some generic set thrown at you by the IT support team. And no one wants to deal with confusing tech jargon. I've heard too many stories about IT companies giving out metrics that are a puzzle to decipher.

REASON TO SWITCH 2)
POOR COMMUNICATION

This spans a wide spectrum of concerns—from prolonged response times, to a lack of communication about updates, and even failing to follow through on commitments. In any other supplier scenario, these grievances would be intolerable, but in the realm of technology, where the smooth functioning of your business relies on IT, these seemingly small issues are often overlooked.

This underscores yet another distinction between an IT support provider and an IT support partner.

What a business really benefits from is a responsive IT support partner who:

1. Swiftly acknowledges issues.
2. Keeps you informed about relevant details.
3. Follows through on their commitments reliably.

As your organization thrives, so does the IT partner.

REASON TO SWITCH 3)
THEY DON'T TAKE DATA SECURITY SERIOUSLY

Yes, you read that correctly.

There are certain IT support providers, tasked with ensuring the safety and security of your data, who fail to apply the same diligence within their own operations.

They neglect to prioritize staying informed about the latest scams and threats, consequently falling short in keeping their clients updated.

This lack of initiative on the providers part can lead to losing the sense of security an IT partner is supposed to provide.

REASON TO SWITCH 4)
THEY WON'T GO OUTSIDE OF THEIR CONTRACT

"We don't cover that."

Have you ever encountered this response from your IT support provider? Many businesses have, but if the request pertains to your technology, it should raise a red flag.

"We don't cover that" implies a lack of genuine concern for your business, which contradicts the essence of a partnership.

A true partner actively seeks ways to enhance your network, data security, and infrastructure. They don't adhere rigidly to a one-size-fits-all contract.

And here lies the crux of the matter. One size doesn't fit all because every business is unique. Even two businesses in the same locale, offering similar products or services, operate differently. They utilize diverse software and devices, employ different personnel, and, importantly, pursue distinct goals.

You require an IT support partner who adopts your goals as their own and endeavors to assist you in achieving them to the best of their ability.

REASON TO SWITCH 5)
THINGS TAKE TOO LONG TO FIX

Naturally, not all problems can be resolved immediately. Yet, effective communication is crucial in these situations.

While it may take some time to reach a resolution, consistent updates from your IT support partner provide assurance that the matter is being addressed.

However, if your support request remains unanswered three days later, you've got a problem. All this waiting translates to downtime for your business. Where's the value in that?

The nature of technology is that it malfunctions and doesn't always meet our expectations. However, you shouldn't constantly face unresolved issues or endure lengthy waits for resolutions. Silence when you seek assistance is unacceptable.

REASON TO SWITCH 6)
THEY NEVER ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY

When engaging an IT support partner, it's crucial for both parties to uphold their responsibilities outlined in the agreement. Failing to do so erodes trust significantly and hinders the progress of the relationship.

I've encountered instances where business owners reported an issue to their IT support provider, only to be unfairly blamed for the problem, despite diligently following advice and instructions from the same provider.

Similarly, I've heard from business owners who reported issues to their IT support provider, only to be redirected to contact another entity, such as a software supplier, to address the problem.

The essence of having an IT support partner is to entrust them with handling their area of expertise while you focus on yours. If they're quick to shift responsibility when problems arise, you're not benefiting from a supportive partnership at all.

REASON TO SWITCH 7)
THEY CONFUSE YOU WITH TECH TALK

I**f technology were straightforward, managing one's own business infrastructure would be a breeze.** Unfortunately, the reality is quite the opposite. It's riddled with unfamiliar terminology and ever-evolving concepts, with changes seemingly occurring every few minutes.

Navigating this landscape can feel like traversing a minefield for those lacking expertise.

A reliable IT support partner excels at simplifying this complexity, making it appear effortless and understandable. Even more importantly, they convey information in a manner that doesn't feel like decoding a foreign language.

Once again, effective communication underscores the success of the partnership. If both parties struggle to communicate effectively, the relationship is bound to be unproductive, leaving everyone frustrated and hindering your business's ability to maximize its technological resources.

REASON TO SWITCH 8)
YOU'RE NOT LEARNING

We don't expect your IT support partner to teach you their job. You don't have to be an IT expert – that's what you're paying them for. However, there should be some learning involved when you partner with an IT company.

For example, you should understand cybersecurity, how to avoid scams, and how to protect your data.

If you're told, "Let us handle that," it should raise concerns. You can't keep your organization safe from data breaches or theft if you don't know what to protect yourself from.

Also, it's important for your IT support partner to explain what they're doing. You should have a basic understanding of how your infrastructure works or is set up for you. This will help you handle minor issues on your own.

REASON TO SWITCH 9)
THEY'RE ALWAYS PUSHING NEW HARDWARE

Many of our clients have expressed frustration that their previous IT support providers prioritized pushing new equipment over addressing fundamental needs.

While having the latest technology in your business can be appealing, it's not always essential. There are numerous factors to weigh before upgrading equipment and devices, particularly in today's climate where value for money and return on investment are paramount.

Certainly, your business requires a certain level of equipment to function effectively, but chances are you already have most of what you need. In my experience, focusing on getting the infrastructure right before considering hardware upgrades is often more crucial. Additional devices, while sometimes desirable, are not always essential.

A reliable IT support partner will assist you in creating an IT roadmap. This roadmap should outline when budgeting for upgrades or additional devices will be necessary in the coming years.

REASON TO SWITCH 10)
YOU'VE OUTGROWN THEM

Now, this isn't necessarily a negative reason to switch IT support partners. Sometimes, as your business grows, it outgrows smaller IT companies.

That's actually good news for you. The challenge is knowing when to make the switch, especially if you have a good rapport with your current provider.

Here's something to consider:

- If your support requests aren't being addressed promptly,
- If you're no longer receiving recommendations on how to leverage technology for business growth, or
- If you require a higher level of support,

...then it's probably time to find a new IT support partner.

Chances are, if you've noticed these issues, your IT support partner has too. In fact, if they're good partners, they might even discuss this with you beforehand. Trust me, there won't be any hard feelings; no company wants to struggle to meet their clients' needs.

If any of these concerns resonate with you, perhaps it's time to consider making the switch?

When your business growth strategy hinges on technology, having a trusted partner is crucial.

Every business has its flaws. We're all human, after all, and we do make mistakes sometimes.

CHAPTER 3

Protect the most important
thing in your business

As we've seen over the past few years, being able to work anywhere, any time, on any device is liberating.

Operating flexibly like this enables businesses to cut costs, attract top talent, and cultivate a happier workforce.

With data stored in the cloud, losing a device is no longer an issue. You simply replace it and restore your files from your backup, essentially getting a new device with all your old data.

While this flexibility is incredible, it comes with risks. Taking your device outside the office potentially exposes your data to cyber threats. Unfortunately, there are numerous cybercriminals relentlessly trying to access and steal your data.

You've likely heard of malware, which is malicious software designed to infect, steal, or corrupt data once it's within your network. It's troublesome because it can go undetected for a while and be challenging to remove.

Even more alarming is ransomware, the fastest-growing cybercrime today. Without proper precautions, you're likely to fall victim to this devastating form of attack at some point.

Ransomware is terrifying, and trust me, you need to prevent it at all costs.

Ransomware encrypts your data, making it inaccessible, and demands a ransom for its release. For instance, hackers may demand $7,000 in Bitcoin within three days, doubling the fee if not paid promptly. If a week passes without payment, your data may be lost forever.

Typically it's small and medium-sized businesses that are targeted. Cybercriminals know that these businesses often don't prioritize spending excessive time or money on cybersecurity.

It's estimated that more than half of businesses have been targeted with ransomware attacks.

Ransomware often enters your device or network when someone clicks a deceptive email link. These emails mimic genuine ones from trusted sources like the IRS, your bank, or even another department in your business, making them hard to distinguish. They typically urge you to take a simple action, like updating your details. I've seen careful people be fooled by these messages.

Once ransomware is installed, an immediate attack isn't always launched. It can often take up to 100 days for anything to happen. This is because the longer a hacker remains undetected within your network, the more challenging it becomes for you to detect them. Typically, hackers enter through one device and then spread within the network. The more devices they control, the harder it is to remove them once the attack begins.

This is why ransomware prevention is critical.

- Software being disabled
- New software being downloaded
- Remote access sessions lasting for days at a time
- Unexpected new administrators appearing on your network

There are, of course, numerous technical aspects to consider, but these will give you a solid starting point.

A reliable IT support partner will always advocate for regular cybersecurity training for everyone in your company. After all, your employees serve as the primary defense against cyberattacks. Relying solely on software isn't sufficient for robust protection; you need both software and human vigilance.

It's crucial to grasp that achieving 100% protection from malware, ransomware, and other threats is unattainable. It's a perpetual cat-and-mouse game where cybercriminals constantly innovate, and the field of data security must keep pace.

While it's possible to attain 99.99% protection, you might be surprised to learn that we don't always endorse striving for absolute security.

Here's the thing: When you fortify your data security to the extreme, you risk frustrating and burdening your staff. They'll face additional layers of security measures, adding complexity to their already busy workflows and more information to remember.

In practical terms, this could lead them to skip steps and seek shortcuts around security measures, ultimately heightening your business's vulnerability.

Think of it like securing an office door: If you install seven hefty locks and a biometric scanner just to gain entry, people will eventually grow exasperated and resort to propping the door open!

The trick lies in finding the balance of security and utility that each business needs in order to function. Conversation need to happen where IT providers ask hard questions and decisions are made that can increase security without hampering and frustrating users.

The beauty in this approach lies in its adaptability. Each business has different needs and this blended approach to security lets a business thrive without unnececary risk.

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CHAPTER 4

Why you should be highly skeptical of all IT support companies

You probably don't know what you don't know about IT. Does that make sense?

I believe it's reasonable for me to make that assumption.

And why should you bother with staying updated on the latest tech news, software, and support updates? You're too busy being an good at what you do best.

Chances are, you already keep up with industry magazines, blogs, attend trade shows, conferences, and undergo training – after all, you're an expert in your field. That's what experts do. Surely, you don't have the time to dedicate to IT matters on top of everything else.

Would you expect your clients to possess the same level of expertise in your field as you do? Probably not. That's precisely why they hire you, isn't it?

The same principle applies to them.

We immerse ourselves completely in the fast-paced, ever-evolving world of technology. We're genuinely passionate about it and take pride in possessing a level of expertise that most people don't.

It might surprise you how many individuals consider themselves IT experts simply because they're proficient with computers. However, in reality, reputable IT support companies operate on an entirely different level – armed with superior knowledge, tools, and systems.

The primary issue with IT support lies in its lack of regulation. There's no governing body that individuals must pass through to qualify as an IT support company, no industry standard to adhere to, no guidelines on how to conduct business.

Almost anyone... **literally anyone**... can establish themselves and claim to be an IT support company.

That's why you should be highly skeptical of all IT support companies.

Without asking the right questions, you can't be certain whether you're entrusting your business's security and data to a reputable, trustworthy company or to someone operating alone out of their parents' spare bedroom – what I like to call a "bedroom warrior."

Now, don't get me wrong, there's absolutely nothing wrong with bedroom warriors. Everyone has to start somewhere, and if you're a solo operator with minimal IT needs, that could indeed be the most cost-effective solution for you.
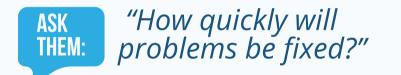
However, if you're own or manage an established, growing business with staff and multiple computers, relying solely on an individual working from their bedroom might not suffice.

So, how can you ensure you're selecting the right IT support company?

First and foremost, seek reliability. It's crucial to verify that they possess the appropriate qualifications, accreditations, and experience. Remember, it's an unregulated industry, so you'll need to do your due diligence to ensure you end up with the best possible IT partner. Then...

Ask them some tough questions.

It's essential to ensure they can deliver what you need. Asking challenging questions is the only way to guarantee you're making the right choice.

ASK THEM: *"How quickly will problems be fixed?"*

Obviously, this will depend on the scale of the problem, but it's crucial to have a clear understanding of time frames based on severity. How long do they anticipate it will take to assign someone to address the problem?

Consider various scenarios. For instance, if you're unable to access your software, what's the expected timeframe for resolving the issue and getting you logged in? And in the event of a ransomware attack, how long could it take to restore your business operations?

It's important to grasp the approach your potential new partner will take. Do they have established processes and procedures for handling issues, or do they tend to improvise? Can they share insights into the most challenging problem they've faced and how they tackled it?

Keep in mind, you're not evaluating them based on the problem itself, but rather on their response to it. This can provide valuable insight into their professionalism, expertise, and ability to remain composed during a crisis.

ASK THEM: *"What do you do proactively to make sure my team have fewer interruptions?"*

Downtime kills businesses.

You've probably experienced it firsthand, either in your own business or one you've worked for. Picture this: the internet goes down, and suddenly, people can't access the software they need to carry out their tasks. The office erupts into chaos. Even those not dependent on the internet halt their activities. The coffee machine works overtime. Everyone takes an impromptu break.

But once everything is back online, it's not smooth sailing right away. Conversations need to be resumed, systems require rebooting, and everyone needs to refocus, which often takes even more time. So what initially seemed like a brief 15-minute interruption ends up costing you 90 minutes of productivity.

And that's in the case of a minor problem.

What steps can your IT support partner take to minimize this downtime?

Will they be proactive behind the scenes, conducting checks to prevent most of these minor disruptions? Can they guarantee that updates and maintenance will predominantly occur outside of business hours?

Do they offer any other solutions to ensure your business remains productive during essential maintenance and upgrades?

ASK THEM: *"Tell me about the specific people who'll be looking after us."*

While it's a crucial consideration, many businesses tend to overlook this aspect when selecting a partner.

It's essential to understand the individuals you'll be collaborating with, the faces behind the business.

How does your potential IT support partner go about assigning your account manager? Do these managers specialize in specific sectors? Do they take into account compatibility in terms of personalities? Or is it simply based on workload availability?

Will you consistently liaise with the same person? What happens if that person is unavailable due to vacation or illness? Who will handle your strategic IT reviews and develop your technology roadmap? Who do you turn to if you're dissatisfied with the service?

This question not only provides insight into the company you're considering but also helps you gauge whether their team is the right fit for yours.

ASK THEM: *"Can you explain what Virtualization is, how it works, and how I can use it?"*

This question isn't about expecting you to become an expert in building an IT infrastructure from scratch. Instead, it assesses your potential IT support partner's capability to communicate complex technical processes in layman's terms, avoiding jargon. Feel free to substitute this topic with any other.

Can they effectively explain intricate technical processes to you in a way that's easy to understand? Do they become impatient if you ask numerous questions? Do they dismiss your inquiries with "you don't need to know the technical details"?

When partnering with someone, it's crucial to communicate clearly without any confusion or breakdowns.

This also showcases their ability to educate you on the important subject matters that may arise while they do your support, so you can make informed decisions.

"How will you keep on top of the constant changes in my business?"

It's no secret that successful businesses navigate through a lot of change. Whether it's adding new staff members or fine-tuning the products or services you offer, change is a constant part of business growth.

In fact, your business probably looks vastly different now compared to just 12 months ago.

So, how would your potential IT support partner adapt to these changes? How much awareness do they need about these developments, and will it impact their services for you?

It absolutely should. Remember, you're seeking a partner here, not merely a supplier. It's their responsibility to provide recommendations based on your evolving needs, whether it's suggesting more suitable software, optimizing your network, or enhancing security measures.

If they're not keeping track of your staffing changes or the evolution of your service delivery methods, how can they propose ways to enhance, grow, and most importantly, safeguard your operations?

Seek out a partner who actively engages with the changes happening within your business. They need to be proactive about arranging regular check-ins to ensure they're fully informed about all ongoing developments.

While there are certainly other questions worth asking, I believe these five will provide meaningful insight into your potential partner's suitability.

CHAPTER 5

What every IT support
company wishes you
knew about IT

What I am going to talk about are the basic things that – if everyone knew them – would make IT partnerships work a lot better.

#1: YOUR SETUP NEEDS CONSTANT MONITORING AND MAINTENANCE. IT IS NOT A ONE-OFF JOB

Computers and other devices constantly prompt you to update them. That's because things are always evolving.

The same goes for your network and infrastructure. Software undergoes regular changes, operating systems are continuously tweaked, and hardware naturally deteriorates. It's an ongoing process that never stops.

In professional IT circles, it's almost unheard of for an IT setup not to be under constant monitoring and maintenance. If your IT contract doesn't include 24/7 monitoring and maintenance, it's a red flag. You could start experiencing issues almost immediately after signing the contract.

Most IT support companies handle these tasks discreetly in the background, so you're often unaware of their ongoing efforts. A top-notch IT support partner dedicates significant time to monitoring your system and resolving issues before they become noticeable problems.

Ideally, you won't even realize this monitoring and maintenance are happening – and that's precisely what you want: seamless monitoring and maintenance that you hardly notice.

Support providers want to be committed to long-term collaborations.

They don't engage in ad-hoc tasks or one-off crisis management. Instead, they prioritize forming enduring partnerships with businesses.

Why?

For starters, building a business around long-term clients is not only beneficial but also a solid business model, to be frank.

However, the real value of long-term partnerships lies in the investment they can make inthclients. By truly understanding your business inside and out, they're able to:

- Work closely with you.
- Understand your priorities and actively contribute to achieving your goals.
- Tailor your infrastructure and IT strategy to align with your future trajectory, not just your current state.
- Establish a scalable infrastructure that evolves alongside your business.
- Provide enhanced protection by taking a transparent and strategic approach within a trusted partnership.

These benefits simply can't be realized in short-term engagements.

A long-term partnership means their commitment is as unwavering as yours because they genuinely care about your business. Your success is their success.

#3: OUTSOURCED IS BETTER VALUE FOR MONEY. AND IT HELPS YOU ACCESS BETTER EXPERTISE THAN THE SAME SPEND IN-HOUSE

As you assess your IT support options, you may have considered hiring an in-house employee.

However, there's a significant drawback to keep in mind. When you have an in-house staff member, you're essentially tasking them with juggling multiple specialized roles and supporting a large number of people simultaneously.

Finding someone who can manage all these responsibilities without experiencing burnout is quite challenging! They might even resort to cutting corners just to wrap up their tasks and head home on time each day.

On the other hand, outsourcing this work might entail higher costs compared to hiring an in-house employee. However, you gain access to a team of professionals with diverse skills and specialties. Plus, they won't clock out until the job is done.

Thank you for reading.

We hope this was useful.

If you have questions about
anything in this guide, or about IT
in general, feel free to reach out.

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