

Your guide to
choosing an IT support provider



Choosing an IT support provider

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Choosing an IT support provider

Introduction



Most companies rely heavily on IT to get things done these days. Emails, invoices, orders, drawings, confidential files... chances are, your computer systems are business-critical. But does your IT setup and support provider reflect that?

From time to time, every company will experience IT problems and queries. Some of those things may have a serious impact on your business, such as:

- Immediate service disruptions that stop production, such as server hardware failure
- Unwanted intrusions, such as viruses
- Data loss, from either accidental deletion or system corruptions
- Unexpected environmental factors, such as the theft of copper wiring.

If disaster strikes, you'll need strong support in place to reduce the negative effects and put things right as fast as possible.

At PCS, we provide 'managed services' – in other words, access to a reliable, experienced and friendly IT support team when you need it. This means you can control and manage your costs, just outsourcing services on the things that you can't or don't want to offer in-house.

Managed services are partly about "if it's broke, we'll fix it", but you should also think about proactive management options. Prevention is always better than cure so ask yourself if you need backup monitoring, anti-virus updates, email spam cleaning, server/software patches and the like.

If you should need IT advice or support at any point, please do bear us in mind. PCS offers flexible pricing, the choice of remote or on-site support and named account managers who look after customers until any problems are resolved. We even provide a no-cost, no-obligation IT health-check if you're worried and need some expert advice for your business.

We hope you enjoy reading our guide. To find out more about what we offer, please visit our [account management web page](#), [email PCS](#) or [call our friendly team](#) on 08452 41 41 55.

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IT and business continuity



When work is busy, it's easy to focus on the here and now rather than planning for the future. Business continuity planning can seem pretty tedious compared to getting orders in or managing services!

In our experience, it's hard to understand the need for a business continuity plan until you've had a major problem (and then it's too late). But think about the practicalities and the dangers to your business become obvious. For example, imagine what might happen if your:

- Emails went down and that major order you're banking on never arrived (your customer may not even know their email hasn't been received...)
- Users couldn't access files, email, calendars, ordering systems or the internet because a simple £100 network switch stopped working
- Remote users couldn't access work systems
- Payroll systems didn't work and staff were paid several days late
- Outside cabling was damaged or stolen and the local service level agreement means things wouldn't be repaired for a week.

Assessing your business continuity risks is a way of making sure that your business could cope in a crisis. So it's well worth doing.

Data backups

When you think about disaster recovery options, also take time to think about how quickly you'd need your data up and running again. For example, if you have a tape-based recovery system, an IT support provider might take a week to rebuild your systems from scratch; whereas if you use image-based recovery, you could be back online within an hour or two... so balance your operational costs with potential budget.

At PCS we run automated and manual backup checks every day, to make sure everything is working. If we spot any potential problems, we'll deal with them straightaway so you don't have to worry.

There are also optional extras such as email continuity and a spam filter. This means that if your server goes down, we'll queue your email and provide a login service so you can access your emails securely through any internet connection anywhere.

Want to know more? Here are a couple of resources that may help you:

[Business Link - business continuity planning risk assessment tool](#)

[BSi - business continuity standards.](#)

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About managed services



Managed services contracts are where you outsource all, or part, of your IT systems management because you don't have the time or skills to do everything yourself.

Why might you need a contract?

Depending on your business age and size, you might find yourself in one of the following situations:

- Startup – if you're a business owner who has recently started a company, you may lack the time and skills needed to manage your own IT in-house, so you'll need a bit of input from specialists
- Growth – if your company is growing, it may be time for you to move up from one or two computers to a bigger network; you may also be taking on extra people who work from different offices (or remotely from home); in this case, you could find smaller support companies don't have the capacity to support you any more
- Maturity – if you're an established company, you might already have your own IT team and just want to call on extra skills, such as an expert in say VMware or Microsoft products.

What should a contract cover?

Typically a service contract will cover the equipment you own or lease, and the speed at which you want help if anything goes wrong. Let's look at each of these in turn.

- Equipment – what's most precious to your business? That's what you need to cover. So if your company relies on a server for email and data sharing, that might be your top priority if there was a power outage. Individual computers, monitors or printers might be less important, but there are exceptions – sometimes we find payroll teams are prized very highly, for example!
- Speed – the other big thing to consider is how quickly you'd need things up and running again if things go wrong. Do you need an agreement that states an XX-hour response time or are you more concerned that urgent jobs will get the priority you need to keep your business running smoothly?

The best way to work out what's right for you is to look at what's business-critical, and how quickly you'd want each piece of equipment restored to 'business as usual'. An IT provider can then work out a specification and price to deliver the service you need. If you need extra reassurance, think about remote monitoring, where IT specialists can track and predict problems direct from a service desk.

At PCS, we take time to listen and understand how urgent your problem is and respond to suit your business. We assess who's affected, the extent of any problems and how quickly services need restoring. (After all, there's a big difference between your server being down and one of the central office printers having a paper jam...) That way, you get the service you need at a reasonable cost; we won't leave you high and dry in an emergency, and you don't pay extra for a blanket "four-hour support" agreement.

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Modular vs packaged support



When you outsource IT support, you'll usually find that potential providers will offer you a choice of:

- Modular services – where you buy a package of services based on what you need and your specified budget (such as remote monitoring, mail control, visits to your premises, annual health-checks and the like)
- Tiered services – where you choose between 'bands' of support (such as 1, 2 and 3 or gold, silver and bronze); lower levels might get basic telephone support, and the higher you go, the more support you get. Some tiered services have a chain of command, where your call gradually escalates depending on the severity of the situation.

At PCS, we run a completely modular system; you tell us what you want and we work out the price. So if you just want on-site support, you can have it. If you only want certain extras, it's up to you.

All of our service desk people are qualified engineers, who understand IT and can help you with all sorts of enquiries - from fluff in your mouse to your Exchange system being down. Whoever takes your call will stay with you until the problem is sorted, and that's an important part of our service.

Do you need remote monitoring or on-site support?

Most IT providers will offer you a choice of maintenance options. These generally include:

- Remote monitoring – where someone keeps tabs on your computer systems from another location
- Helpdesk support – where you can call for help in an IT emergency
- On-site support – where an expert comes out to see you at your company premises.

You can of course have all three options if you want them; it depends on your business needs. For example, if you've got offices in several towns or cities, an IT provider might provide on-site support for one location, and remote monitoring for the rest, plus helpdesk assistance to support your staff.

If you choose remote monitoring and helpdesk support, providers like PCS can offer extra reassurance. It means you don't have to sit in front of your servers 24 hours a day, seven days a week; we'll call or email you if anything happens with your system, so you can get on with the day (or night) job.

There can be differences between types of remote monitoring. Some providers may spot a problem and just deal with it without referring things to you. If you're relaxed about this approach, all well and good.

At PCS, we prefer to talk things through with you first and recommend changes so you have the final say. That way, you understand what's happening. If you want someone on-site to go through the changes with you, that's fine too. But we won't change anything without chatting with you first and recommending changes. So if you're the sort of person who might notice changes to your computer and start worrying, it can be nice for someone to explain what's happening and bring you up to speed.

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Checklist of supplier questions



Question	What to look for	Response
How do you prioritise and deal with incoming enquiries?	Timescales for dealing with enquiries, whether one person owns the call and the provider's capacity to respond to multiple clients at once	
What qualifications do staff on your front-line service desk hold?	Level of capacity and capability within the company, evidence of qualifications and up-to-date training	
What partnership credentials do you hold with the major IT companies?	Evidence of partnerships and standards, such as Microsoft Gold Partner, HP Preferred Partner, VMWare Enterprise Partner and IBM Advanced Partnership status (for example, VMware has registered, professional and enterprise partners but only the higher levels must prove specific technical competencies)	
What are your Service Level Agreement standards for responding to helpdesk requests?	How the provider classifies different types of enquiry and their response times for dealing with each type	
What proactive services do you offer customers?	List of proactive options to help you keep your systems in good shape (for example health checks, remote monitoring, preventative visits, IT clinics and named engineers who visit you and understand your systems)	
What data backup and recovery options do you provide as standard?	Whether online, tape or imaging options are provided	
What else would you recommend based on your knowledge of my business?	How far providers will go the extra mile to help (as an indication of whether they might do the same if you appoint them)	
What is your business environment like?	The scale and setup of their offices (whether they work in a professional environment, have friendly and presentable employees and appear to be answering enquiries quickly and efficiently)	
What sort of companies do you deal with?	How important your business will be to them and whether they have the capability and capacity to support your business	
Can you give an examples of where you've gone above and beyond the call of duty?	Contracts and service level agreements offer protection, but when unexpected problems arise will this company care and want to help you?	

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