

I.T. Buyers Guide

SmartPath
TECHNOLOGIES

A guide to IT Support and Services for business owners in the modern world.

What You Should Expect To Pay For I.T. Support For Your Business

(And How To Get *Exactly* What You Need Without Unnecessary Extras, Hidden Fees And Bloated Contracts)

Read this guide and you'll discover:

- ✓ The three most common ways I.T. services companies charge for their services, and the pros and cons of each approach.
- ✓ A common billing model that puts ALL THE RISK on you, the customer, when buying I.T. services; you'll learn what it is and why you need to avoid agreeing to it.
- ✓ Exclusions, hidden fees and other "gotcha" clauses I.T. companies put in their contracts that you DON'T want to agree to.
- ✓ How to make sure you know exactly what you're getting to avoid disappointment, frustration and added costs later on that you didn't anticipate.
- ✓ 21 revealing questions to ask your I.T. support firm BEFORE giving them access to your computer network, e-mail and data.

From the Desk of: Willie Kerns
CEO and Owner
SmartPath Technologies

If you are the owner of a local business that is currently looking to outsource some or all of the I.T. support for your company, this report contains important information that will be extremely valuable to you as you search for a competent firm you can **trust**.

My name is Willie Kerns, CEO and owner of SmartPath Technologies. We've been providing I.T. services to businesses in the Western Kentucky/Southern Illinois area for over 20 years. You may not have heard of us before, but I'm sure you're familiar with one or more of the other law firms, manufacturers, engineers, and others that are clients of ours. A few of their comments are enclosed.

One of the most common questions we get from new prospective clients calling our office is "What do you guys charge for your services?" Since this is such a common question – and a very important one to address – I decided to write this report for three reasons:

1.

I wanted an easy way to answer this question and educate all prospective clients who come to us on the most common ways I.T. services companies package and price their services, and the pros and cons of each approach.

2.

I wanted to bring to light a few "industry secrets" about I.T. services contracts and SLAs (service level agreements) that almost no business manager, entrepreneur, or owner thinks about, understands or knows to ask about when evaluating I.T. services providers that can end up burning you with hidden fees and locking you into a long-term contract when they are unwilling or unable to deliver the quality of service you need.

3.

I wanted to educate all business owners on how to pick the **right** I.T. services company for their specific situation, budget and needs based on the **VALUE** the company can deliver, not just the price, high OR low.

In the end, my purpose is to help you make the most informed decision possible, so you end up working with someone who helps you solve your problems and accomplish what you want in a time frame, manner and budget that is right for you.

Dedicated to serving you,

Willie Kerns, CEO

About The Author

Willie Kerns has been working in the computer support and IT industry for over twenty years and has owned a computer consulting company since 2000. Willie has obtained certifications from CompTIA, Microsoft, and Cisco Systems, and spends over 100 hours a year performing continuing education. He and his wife, Kristy, formed SmartPath Technologies in 2008 to serve the technology needs of the business community in the four-state area. With a customer driven focus, Willie has pioneered the concept of preventative maintenance programs – allowing businesses to properly budget for IT expenditures while focusing on what it takes to prevent your computers and network from having problems in the first place. Through innovative technology and proper planning, his clients simply don't experience the down time – and if they do, it's minimal. Willie is also a state certified Firefighter and a volunteer fireman in Calvert City, KY. He serves on the board of the Jackson Purchase Firefighters Association and also serves his community as a member of the Calvert City Zoning Board of Adjustments. He is also the father to Brooke, and a fur baby, Jenni Sue, who occupy all of his free time. Besides IT services, Willie has multitudes of real-world management experience, including serving as General Manager of the largest radio station licensed in the state of Illinois. This multi-industry experience gives him a unique perspective to not only address clients IT and technology issues, but also to work with those clients to use technology to better automate and manage their business.



Willie Kerns
CEO and Owner
SmartPath Technologies

Special Thanks To...

I want to give special thanks to my family for always supporting me, to my team for doing whatever it takes to make it happen for our clients, to my management staff - I couldn't run the technology services business I do without them. Lastly; I always would like to give special thanks to our savior, Jesus Christ, for blessing us with the ability to help local entrepreneurs in our region. I'm just a little boy in a big world; but our mission is to help and serve and I hope that by helping other businesses we are able to help more and serve more.

Comparing Apples To Apples: The Predominant I.T. Service Models Explained

Before you can accurately compare the fees, services and deliverables of one I.T. services company with another, you need to understand the three predominant service models most of these companies fit within. Some companies offer a blend of all three, while others are strict about offering only one service plan. The three predominant service models are:

- **Time and Materials (Hourly).** In the industry, we call this “break-fix” services. Essentially you pay an agreed-upon hourly rate for a technician to “fix” your problem when something “breaks.” Under this model, you might be able to negotiate a discount based on buying a block of hours. The scope of work may be simply to resolve a specific problem, like fixing a problem with your e-mail, or it may encompass a large project, like a network upgrade or move that has a specific result and end date clarified. Some companies will offer staff augmentation and placement under this model as well.
- **Managed I.T. Services.** This is a model where the I.T. services company takes the role of your fully outsourced “I.T. department” and not only installs and supports all the devices and PCs that connect to your server(s), but also offers phone and on-site support, antivirus, cyber security, backup and a host of other services to monitor and maintain the health, speed, performance and security of your computer network.
- **Software Vendor-Supplied I.T. Services.** Many software companies will offer I.T. support for their customers in the form of a help desk or remote support for an additional fee. However, these are typically scaled-back services, limited to troubleshooting their specific application and NOT your entire computer network and all the applications and devices connected to it. If your problem resides outside of their specific software or the server it’s hosted on, they can’t help you and will often refer you to “your I.T. department.” While it’s often a good idea to buy some basic-level support package with a critical software application you use to run your business, this is not enough to provide the full I.T. services and support most businesses need to stay up and running.

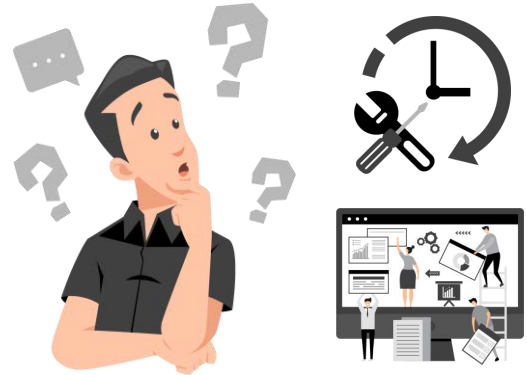


When looking to outsource your I.T. support, the two service models you are most likely to end up having to choose between are the “managed I.T. services” and “break-fix” models. Therefore, let’s dive into the pros and cons of these two options, and then the typical fee structure for both.

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Managed I.T. Services Vs. Break-Fix: Which Is The Better, More Cost-Effective Option?

You've probably heard the famous Benjamin Franklin quote, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." I couldn't agree more – and that's why it's my sincere belief that some form of managed I.T. is essential for every small business owner or for every manager tasked with "handling the computers". We understand that you are overwhelmed and a lot of times all of the technology mumbo-jumbo and geek speak. You won't find that here!



In our company, we offer different plans to fit the needs of our clients. In some cases, where the business is small, we might offer a very basic managed services plan to ensure the most essential maintenance is done, then bill the client hourly for any support used. For our smallest clients, they often find this the most economical. But for some of our midsized organizations, we offer a fully managed approach where more comprehensive I.T. services are covered in a managed plan. By doing this, we can properly staff for their accounts and ensure they get the fast, responsive support and expertise they need.

The only time I would recommend a "time and materials" approach is when you already have a competent I.T. person or team proactively managing your computer network and simply have a specific I.T. project to complete that your current in-house I.T. team doesn't have the time nor expertise to implement (such as migrating to a cloud-based solution, implementing a cyber security plan, etc.). Outside of that specific scenario, I do not think the break-fix approach is a good idea for general I.T. support for one very important, fundamental reason: you'll ultimately end up paying for a pound of "cure" for problems that could have easily been avoided with an "ounce" of prevention.

Why Regular Monitoring And Maintenance Is Critical For Today's Computer Networks

The fact of the matter is computer networks absolutely, positively need ongoing maintenance and monitoring to stay secure. The ever-increasing dependency we have on I.T. systems and the data they hold – not to mention the *type* of data we're now saving digitally – has given rise to very smart and sophisticated cybercrime organizations that work around the clock to do one thing: hack into your network to steal data or money or to hold you ransom.

As you may know, ransomware is at an all-time high because hackers make millions of tax-free dollars robbing one small business owner at a time. But that's not their only incentive.



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Some will attempt to hack your network to gain access to bank accounts, credit cards or passwords to rob you (and your clients). Some use your computer network to send spam using YOUR domain and servers, host pirated software and, of course, spread viruses and ransomware. Some even do it just for the “fun” of it.

And don’t think for a minute these cybercriminals are solo crooks working alone in a hoodie out of their basement. They are highly organized and well-run operations employing *teams* of hackers who work together to scam as many people as they can. They use advanced software that scans millions of networks for vulnerabilities and use readily available data on the dark web of YOUR usernames, passwords, e-mail addresses and other data to gain access.

Of course, this isn’t the only I.T. danger you face. Other common “disasters” include rogue employees, lost devices, hardware failures (still a BIG reason for data loss), fire and natural disasters and a host of other issues that can interrupt or outright destroy your I.T. infrastructure and the data it holds. Then there’s regulatory compliance for any business hosting or touching credit card or financial information, medical records and even client contact information, such as e-mail addresses.

Preventing these problems and keeping your systems up and running (which is what managed I.T. services is all about) is a LOT less expensive and damaging to your organization than waiting until one of these things happens and then paying for emergency I.T. services to restore your systems to working order (break-fix).

Should You Just Hire A Full-Time I.T. Manager?

In most cases, it is not cost-effective for companies with under 100 employees to hire a full-time I.T. person for a couple of reasons.

First of all, no one I.T. person can know everything there is to know about I.T. support and cyber security. If your company is big enough and growing fast enough to support a full-time I.T. lead, you probably need more than one guy. You need someone with help-desk expertise as well as a network engineer, a network administrator, a CIO (chief information officer) and a CISO (chief information security officer).



Therefore, even if you hire a full-time I.T. person, you may still need to supplement their position with co-managed I.T. support using an I.T. firm that can fill in the gaps and provide services and expertise they don’t have. This is not a bad plan; what IS a bad plan is hiring one person and expecting them to know it all and do it all.

Second, finding and hiring good people is difficult; finding and hiring skilled I.T. people is incredibly difficult due to the skill shortage for I.T.. And if you’re not technical, it’s going to be very difficult for you to interview candidates and sift and sort through all the duds out there to find someone with good skills and experience. Because you’re not technical, you might not know the right questions to ask during the interview process or the skills they need to do the job.

More often than not, the hard and soft costs of building an internal I.T. department for general I.T. support just don’t provide the best return on investment for the average small to midsize business. An internal I.T. department typically doesn’t make sense until you have closer to 150 employees OR you have unique circumstances and need specialized skills, a developer, etc., but not for day-to-day I.T. support and maintenance.

Why “Break-Fix” Works Entirely In The Consultant’s Favor, Not Yours

Under a “break-fix” model, there is a fundamental conflict of interests between you and your I.T. firm. The I.T. services company has no incentive to prevent problems, stabilize your network or resolve problems quickly because they are getting paid by the hour when things stop working; therefore, the risk of unforeseen circumstances, scope creep, learning curve inefficiencies and outright incompetence are all shifted to YOU, the customer. Essentially, the more problems you have, the more they profit, which is precisely what you DON’T want.



Under this model, the I.T. consultant can take the liberty of assigning a junior (lower-paid) technician to work on your problem – one who may take two to three times as long to resolve an issue that a more senior (and more expensive) technician might resolve in a fraction of the time. There is no incentive to properly manage the time of that technician or their efficiency, and there is every reason for them to prolong the project and find MORE problems than solutions. Of course, if they’re ethical and want to keep you as a client, they *should* be doing everything possible to resolve your problems quickly and efficiently; however, that’s akin to putting a German shepherd in charge of watching over the ham sandwiches. Not a good idea.

Second, it creates a management problem for you, the customer, who now has to keep track of the hours they’ve worked to make sure you aren’t getting overbilled, and since you often have no way of really knowing if they’ve worked the hours they say they have, it creates a situation where you really, truly need to be able to trust they are being 100% ethical and honest AND tracking THEIR hours properly (not all do).

And finally, it makes budgeting for I.T. projects and expenses a nightmare since they may be zero one month and thousands the next.

What Should You Expect To Pay?

"How much is this going to cost?" is one of the most frequent questions we get. There are a lot of factors that go into that. Not all consultants and providers include the same services which can make an apples-to-apples comparison often times hard to do. As the cyber landscape changes, businesses are spending more on things around security, two factor authentication, and keeping the bad guys out than they ever have and that's only going to increase.

Important! Please note that the following price quotes are industry averages based on a recent I.T. industry survey conducted of over 750 different I.T. services firms. We are providing this information to give you a general idea of what most I.T. services firms charge and to help you understand the VAST DIFFERENCES in service contracts that you must be aware of before signing on the dotted line. Please understand that this does NOT reflect our pricing model or approach, which is simply to understand exactly what you want to accomplish FIRST and then customize a solution based on your specific needs, budget and situation.



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Hourly Break-Fix Fees:

Most I.T. services companies selling break-fix services charge between \$80-\$200 per hour with a one-hour minimum. In most cases, they will give you a discount of 5% to as much as 20% on their hourly rates if you purchase and pay for a block of hours in advance.

If they are quoting a **project**, the fees range widely based on the scope of work outlined. If you are hiring an I.T. consulting firm for a project, I suggest you demand the following:

- **A very detailed scope of work that specifies what “success” is.** Make sure you detail what your expectations are in performance, workflow, costs, security, access, etc. The more detailed you can be, the better. Detailing your expectations up front will go a long way toward avoiding miscommunications and additional fees later on to give you what you REALLY wanted.
- **A fixed budget and time frame for completion.** Agreeing to this up front aligns both your agenda and the consultant’s. Be very wary of loose estimates that allow the consulting firm to bill you for “unforeseen” circumstances. The bottom line is this: it is your I.T. consulting firm’s responsibility to be able to accurately assess your situation and quote a project based on their experience. You should not have to pick up the tab for a consultant underestimating a job or for their inefficiencies. A true professional knows how to take into consideration those contingencies and bill accordingly.

Managed I.T. Services:

Most managed I.T. services firms will quote you a MONTHLY fee based on the number of devices they need to maintain, back up and support. In this region, that fee is somewhere in the range of \$100-\$200 per user per month. If you have 10 people on your staff, you should expect to pay around \$1500 per month for unlimited services – including things like your e-mail and Microsoft 365 subscription, and your other software.

If you hire an I.T. consultant and sign up for a managed I.T. services contract, here are some things that SHOULD be included (make sure you read your contract to validate this):

- Security patches applied weekly, if not daily, for urgent and emerging threats
- Antivirus updates and monitoring
- Firewall updates and monitoring
- Backup monitoring and test restores
- Spam-filter installation and updates
- Monitoring workstations and servers for signs of failure
- Optimizing systems for maximum speed
- Documentation of your network, software licenses, credentials, etc.
- Answering their phones live and solving any issues you have

The following services may **NOT be included** and will often be billed separately. This is not necessarily a “scam” or unethical UNLESS the managed I.T. services company tries to hide these fees when selling you a service agreement. Make sure you review your contract carefully to know what is and is NOT included!

- Hardware (ex. new servers), PCs, laptops, etc.
- Software – for example, QuickBooks
- Projects – things outside the normal scope of daily support. We consider projects anything that will take over 5 hours, affect more than 5 people, or affect more than 5 computers.

Warning! Beware the gray areas of “all-inclusive” service contracts. In order to truly compare the “cost” of one managed I.T. services contract with another, you need to make sure you fully understand what IS and ISN’T included AND the SLA (service level agreement) you are signing up for. It’s VERY easy for one I.T. services provider to appear less expensive than another UNTIL you look closely at what you’re getting. *Making sure you get a true apples to apples quote is very important.*

The following are 21 questions to ask your I.T. services provider that will clarify exactly what you're getting for the money. Some of these items may not be that important to you, while others (like response time, adequate insurance and uptime guarantees) may be critical. Make sure you fully understand each of these items before making a decision about who the right provider is for you, then make sure you get this IN WRITING.

21 Questions You Should Ask Your I.T. Services Company Or Consultant Before Hiring Them For I.T. Support

Customer Service:

Q1

When I have an I.T. problem, how do I get support?

Our Answer: When a client has a problem, we "open a ticket" in our I.T. management system so we can properly assign, track, prioritize, document and resolve client issues. However, some I.T. firms force you to log in to submit a ticket and won't allow you to call or e-mail them. This is for THEIR convenience, not yours. Trust me, this will become a giant inconvenience and thorn in your side. While a portal is a good option, it should never be your ONLY option for requesting support.

Also, make sure they HAVE a reliable system in place to keep track of client "tickets" and requests. If they don't, I can practically guarantee your requests will sometimes get overlooked, skipped and forgotten.

Requesting support should also be EASY for you. So be sure to ask how you can submit a problem to their support desk for resolution. We make it easy. Calling, e-mailing or submitting a ticket via our portal puts your I.T. issue on the fast track to getting resolved. Make sure whomever you are considering answers their phone live and you don't have to deal with "Press 1 for..."!

Q2

Do you offer after-hours support, and if so, what is the guaranteed response time?

Our Answer: Any good I.T. company will answer their phones LIVE (not voice mail or phone trees) and respond from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every weekday. But many CEOs and executives work outside normal "9 to 5" hours and need I.T. support both nights and weekends. Not only can you reach our after-hours support any time and any day, we GUARANTEE a response time of four hours or less for normal problems, and within 90 minutes for problems marked "emergency," such as a network being down or a critical problem that is significantly impacting your ability to work.



Q3

Do you have a written, guaranteed response time for working on resolving your problems?

Our Answer: Most I.T. firms offer a 60-minute or 30-minute response time to your call during normal business hours. Be very wary of someone who doesn't have a guaranteed response time **IN WRITING** – that's a sign they are too disorganized, understaffed or overwhelmed to handle your request. Our written, guaranteed response time is three hours or less. A good I.T. firm should also be able to show you statistics from their PSA (professional services automation) software, where all client problems (tickets) get responded to and tracked. Ask to see a report on average ticket response and resolution times.

**Q4**

Will I be given a dedicated account manager?

Our Answer: Smaller firms may not offer this due to staff limitations, and the owner may tell you they will personally manage your account. While that *sounds* like great customer service, the owner is usually so busy that you'll only be given reactive support instead of proactive account management. Rest assured, from initial call to final resolution, you will work with our **SAME** dedicated account manager who will know you, your business and your goals.

Q5

Do you have a feedback system in place for your clients to provide "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" ratings on your service? If so, can I see those reports?

Our Answer: If they don't have this type of feedback system, they may be hiding their lousy customer service results. If they **DO** have one, ask to see the actual scores and reporting. That will tell you a lot about the quality of service they are providing. We are very proud of our positive client feedback scores and will be happy to show them to you.



I.T. Maintenance (Managed Services): _____

Q6

Do you offer true managed I.T. services and support?

Our Answer: You want to find an I.T. company that will proactively monitor for problems and perform routine maintenance on your I.T. systems. If they don't have the ability to do this, or they don't offer it, we strongly recommend you look somewhere else. Our remote network monitoring system watches over your network to constantly look for developing problems, security issues and other problems so we can address them **BEFORE** they turn into bigger problems.

What is **NOT** included in your managed services agreement?

Our Answer: Another “gotcha” many I.T. companies fail to explain is what is NOT included in your monthly managed services agreement that will trigger an invoice. Their so-called “all you can eat” option is RARELY true – there are limitations to what’s included and you want to know what they are BEFORE you sign.

It’s very common for projects to not be included, like a server upgrade, moving offices, adding new employees and, of course, the software and hardware you need to purchase.

But here’s a question you need to ask: If you were hit with a costly ransomware attack, would the recovery be EXTRA or included in your contract? Recovering from a cyber-attack could take HOURS of high-level I.T. expertise. Who is going to eat that bill? Be sure you’re clear on this before you sign, because surprising you with a big, fat bill is totally and completely unacceptable.

Other things to inquire about are:

- Do you offer truly unlimited help desk? (Make sure you are not nickel-and-dimed for every call.)
- Does the service include support for cloud services, such as Microsoft 365?
- Do you charge extra if you have to resolve a problem with a line-of-business application, Internet service provider, phone system, leased printer, etc.? (What you want is an I.T. company that will own the problems and not point fingers. We are happy to call the vendor or software company on your behalf.)
- What about on-site support calls? Or support to remote offices?
- If our employees had to work remote (due to a shutdown, natural disaster, etc.), would you provide support on their home PCs or would that trigger a bill?
- If we were to get ransomed or experience some other disaster (fire, flood, theft, tornado, hurricane, etc.), would rebuilding the network be included in the service plan or considered an extra project we would have to pay for? (Get this IN WRITING. Recovering from such a disaster could take hundreds of hours of time for your I.T. company’s techs, so you want to know in advance how a situation like this will be handled before it happens.)

Our managed services agreement is completely transparent and covers managed computer and technology services, cybersecurity consulting and response, cryptocurrency data center services, public and point to point WiFi networks, telephone & internet services, and technology improvement consulting.



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Q8

Is your help desk local or outsourced?

Our Answer: Be careful because smaller I.T. firms may outsource this critical function. As a result, you may get a tech who is not familiar with you, your network, previous problems and personal preferences. Or worse, they may not be as qualified. This can be frustrating and lead to the same problems cropping up over and over, longer resolution time and you having to spend time educating the tech on your account.

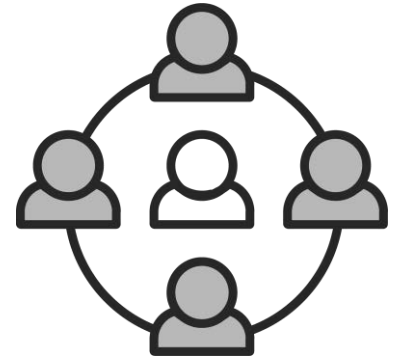
Fortunately, we provide a dedicated technician to your account who will get to know you and your company, as well as your preferences and history. When you work with our local help desk technician, they'll be more capable of successfully resolving your I.T. issues and handling things the way you want.

Q9

How many engineers do you have on staff?

Our Answer: Be careful about hiring small, one-person I.T. firms that only have one or two techs or that outsource this critical role. Everyone gets sick, has emergencies, goes on vacation or takes a few days off from time to time. We have more than enough full-time techs on staff to cover in case one is unable to work.

ALSO: Ask how they will document fixes, changes, credentials for you organization so if one tech is out or unavailable, another can step in and know your network settings, history, previous issues, etc., and how those issues were resolved. This is important or you'll be constantly frustrated with techs who are starting over to resolve a known issue or may screw up something because they don't understand or have a blueprint of your computer network.



Q10

Do you offer documentation of our network as part of the plan, and how does that work?

Our Answer: Network documentation is exactly what it sounds like: the practice of maintaining detailed technical records about the assets you own (computers, devices, software, directory structure, user profiles, passwords, etc.) and how your network is set up, backed up and secured. Every I.T. company should provide this to you in both written (paper) and electronic form at no additional cost and update it on a quarterly basis.

Why is this important? There are several reasons:

First, it shows professionalism and integrity in protecting YOU. No I.T. person or company should be the only holder of the keys to the kingdom. Because we document your network assets and passwords, you have a blueprint you can give to another I.T. person or company to take over if necessary.

Second, good documentation allows the engineers working on your account to resolve problems faster because they don't waste time fumbling their way around your network trying to find things and uncover accounts, hardware, software licenses, etc.

Third, if you had to restore your network after a disaster, you'd have the blueprint to quickly put things back in place as they were.

All our clients receive this in written and electronic form at no additional cost. We also perform a quarterly update on this material and make sure certain key people from your organization have this information and know how to use it, giving you complete control over your network.

Side note: You should NEVER allow an I.T. person to have that much control over you and your company. If you get the sneaking suspicion that your current I.T. person is keeping this under their control as a means of job security, get rid of them (and we can help to make sure you don't suffer ANY ill effects). This is downright unethical and dangerous to your organization, so don't tolerate it!

Q11

Do you meet with your clients quarterly as part of your managed services agreement?

Our Answer: To us, there's nothing more important than face-to-face time with our clients. Therefore, we make it a priority to meet with all our clients at least quarterly (sometimes more often) to provide a "technology review."

In these meetings, we provide you with the status updates of projects you're working on and of the health and security of your network. We also make recommendations for new equipment and upgrades you'll be needing soon or sometime in the near future. Our quarterly meetings with you are C-level discussions (not geek-fests) where we openly discuss your business goals, including your I.T. budget, critical projects, compliance issues, known problems and cyber security best practices.

Our goal in these meetings is to help you improve operations, lower costs, increase efficiencies and ensure your organizational productivity stays high. This is also your opportunity to give us feedback on how we're doing and discuss upcoming projects.



Q12

If I need or want to cancel my service with you, how does this happen and how do you offboard us?

Our Answer: Make sure you carefully review the cancellation clause in your agreement. Many I.T. firms hold their clients hostage with long-term contracts that contain hefty cancellation penalties and will even sue you if you refuse to pay.

We would never "force" a client to stay with us if they are unhappy for any reason. Therefore, we make it easy to cancel your contract with us, with zero contention or fines. Our "easy out" agreements make us work that much harder to exceed your expectations every day so we keep your business.

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Q13

What cyber security certifications do you and your in-house team?

Our Answer: It's important that your I.T. firm have *some* type of *recent* training and certifications, and they should be able to answer this question, which demonstrates a dedication to learning and keeping up with the latest cyber security protections. If they don't have any, and they aren't investing in ongoing training for their engineers, that's a red flag. Some business owners won't invest in training and give this excuse: "What if I spend all this money training my employees and then they leave us for another job?" Our response is "What if you DON'T train them and they stay?"

You can feel confident that our in-house technicians have among the most advanced cyber security training and certifications available and they regularly attend industry events to stay up to speed on the latest security threats.



Q14

How do you lock down our employees' PCs and devices to ensure they're not compromising our network?

Our Answer: As above, the question may get a bit technical. The key is that they HAVE an answer and don't hesitate to provide it. Some of the things they should mention are:

- 2FA (two-factor authentication)
- Advanced end-point protection, NOT just antivirus
- AI based analyzation of websites to block access to malicious sites
- Not allowing non-company owned devices on WiFi
- Phishing e-mail training on a consistent basis

Because a combination of these lockdown strategies is essential to protecting your network and data, we employ ALL of these for our clients. Effective cyber security should never compromise between choosing this OR that. It should feature every weapon in your arsenal.

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Q15

What cyber liability and errors and omissions insurance do you carry to protect me?

Our Answer: Here's something to ask about: if THEY cause a problem with your network that causes you to be down for hours or days, to lose data or get hacked, who's responsible? What if one of their technicians gets hurt at your office? Or damages your property while there?

In this litigious society we live in, you better make darn sure whomever you hire is adequately insured with both errors and omissions insurance, workers' compensation and cyber liability – and don't be shy about asking them to send you the policy to review!



If you get hit with ransomware due to their negligence, someone has to pay for your lost sales, the recovery costs and the interruption to your business operations. If they don't have insurance to cover YOUR losses of business interruption, they might not be able to pay, and you'll have to end up suing them to cover your costs. If sensitive client data is compromised, who's responsible for paying the fines that you might incur and the lawsuits that could happen? No one is perfect, which is why you need them to carry adequate insurance.

True story: A few years ago, a company that shall not be named was slapped with several multimillion-dollar lawsuits from customers for bad behavior by their technicians. In some cases, their techs were accessing, copying and distributing personal information they gained access to on customers' PCs and laptops brought in for repairs. In other cases, they lost a client's laptop (and subsequently all the data on it) and tried to cover it up. Bottom line, make sure the I.T. firm you're hiring has proper insurance to protect YOU.

Rest assured, we make it a priority to carry all the necessary insurance to protect you. Simply ask, and we will be happy to show you a copy of our policy.

Q16

Who audits YOUR company's cyber security protocols and when was the last time they conducted an audit?

Our Answer: Nobody should proofread their own work, and every professional I.T. consulting firm will have an independent third party reviewing and evaluating their company for airtight cyber security practices.

There are many companies that offer this service, so who they use can vary (there's a number of good ones out there.) If they don't have a professional cyber security auditing firm doing this for them on at least a quarterly basis, or if they tell you they get their peers to audit them, DO NOT hire them. That shows they are not taking cyber security seriously.

We take cyber security more serious than almost anything else - we have to in this day and age. In addition, we utilize Galactic Advisors, a cyber security consulting company who works specifically with IT service providers and their clients. We regularly audit and run penetration tests on our network, and our latest tests were conducted this year. Our clients receive the benefit of having Galactic Advisors at their beck and call when needed.

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please visit www.smartpathtech.com or call our office at 270-205-4709.

Q17

Do you have a SOC and do you run it in-house or outsource it? If outsourced, what company do you use?

Our Answer: A SOC (pronounced “sock”), or security operations center, is a centralized department within a company to monitor and deal with security issues pertaining to a company’s network.

What’s tricky here is that some I.T. firms have the resources and ability to run a good SOC in-house (this is the minority of outsourced I.T. firms out there.) Others cannot and outsource it because they know their limitations (not entirely a bad thing).



But the key thing to look for is that *they have one*. Less experienced I.T. consultants may monitor your network hardware, such as servers and workstations, for uptime and patches, but they might not provide security monitoring. This is particularly important if you host sensitive data (financial information, medical records, credit cards, etc.) and fall under regulatory compliance for data protection.

Backups And Disaster Recovery:

Q18

Can you provide a timeline of how long it will take to get my network back up and running in the event of a disaster?

Our Answer: There are two aspects to backing up your data that most business owners aren’t aware of. The first is “fail over” and the other is “fail back.” For example, if you get a flat tire, you would fail over by putting on the spare tire to get to a service station where you can fail back to a new or repaired tire.

If you were to have a disaster that wiped out your data and network – be it a ransomware attack or natural disaster – you want to make sure you have a fail-over solution in place so your employees could continue to work with as little interruption as possible. This fail-over should be in the cloud and locked down separately to avoid ransomware from infecting the backups as well as the physical servers and workstations.

But, at some point, you need to fail back to your on-premise network, and that’s a process that could take days or even weeks. If the backups aren’t done correctly, you might not be able to get it back at all. So, one of the key areas you want to discuss with your next I.T. consultant or firm is how they handle both data backup AND disaster recovery. They should have a plan in place and be able to explain the process for the emergency fail-over as well as the process for restoring your network and data with a timeline.

In this day and age, regardless of natural disaster, equipment failure or any other issue, your business should ALWAYS be able to be operational with its data within six to eight hours or less, and critical operations should be failed over immediately.

We understand how important your data is and how getting your team up and running quickly is essential to your business success. Therefore, in the event of any disaster, we can confidently get your network back up and running in 4 or less.

Q19

Do you **INSIST** on doing periodic test restores of my backups to make sure the data is not corrupt and could be restored in the event of a disaster?

Our Answer: A great I.T. consultant will place eyes on your backup systems every single day to ensure that backups are actually occurring, and without failures. However, in addition to this, your I.T. company should perform a monthly randomized “fire drill” test restore of some of your files from backups to make sure your data CAN be recovered in the event of an emergency. After all, the **WORST** time to “test” a backup is when you desperately need it.



If you don't feel comfortable asking your current I.T. company to test your backup OR if you have concerns and want to see proof yourself, just conduct this little test: Copy three unimportant files onto a thumb drive (so you don't lose them) and delete them from your server. Make sure one was newly created that same day, one was created a week earlier and the last a month earlier. Then call your I.T. company and let them know you've lost three important documents and need them restored from backups as soon as possible. They should be able to do this easily and quickly. If not, you have a problem that needs to be addressed immediately!

Verifying your backups daily and testing them on a regular basis is a cornerstone of a successful overall I.T. strategy. These are the lengths we go to for all our clients, including multiple random “fire drill” test restores to ensure ALL your files are safe because they are always backed up.



TIP: Many people trust on and depend their backup is working. Many times we're called into a disaster situation. The business has felt comfortable they were backing their servers or data up successfully – in some cases, even receiving an e-mail or on-screen confirmation of successful backup. However, when a restore was attempted, it failed – the system hadn't been actually backing up. One of the most important things you can do is occasionally conduct a “fire drill” of your back up system. Create a file today and save it, delete it tomorrow, and the next day, call your IT provider and ask for the file to be restored. You need proof your backup is working, and testing backup on a regular basis is the only way to be comfortable a backup is there to save you when you need it. Conduct fire drill restores of your data!

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Q20

If I were to experience a location disaster, pandemic shutdown or other disaster that prevented me from being in the office, how would you enable me and my employees to work from a remote location?

Our Answer: If Covid and most recently, the tornado that ripped through our area this past year, taught us anything, it's that work-interrupting disasters CAN and DO happen when you least expect them. Fires, floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes can wipe out an entire building or location. Covid forced everyone into lockdown, and it could happen again.

That's why you want to ask your prospective I.T. consultant how quickly they were able to get their clients working remotely (and securely) when Covid and/or the tornado shut everything down. Ask to talk to a few of their clients about how the process went.



We had several clients who suffered considerable damage from the December tornado. One client suffered complete damage, with equipment and documents found over 200 miles away. When they called us Friday night, they were devastated and didn't know where to start. We met them on Saturday, helped them dig through the rubble, got their data restored, and provided enough equipment to conduct business in a remote location by Monday morning. The relationships that we form with our clients are much more than business relationships. We specialize in personal relationships and productivity!

Q21

Show me your process and documentation for onboarding me as a new client.

Our Answer: The reason for asking this question is to see if they HAVE SOMETHING in place. A plan, a procedure, a process. Don't take their word for it. Ask to SEE it in writing. What's important here is that they can produce some type of process. Further, they should be able to explain how their process works.

One thing you will need to discuss in detail is how they are going to take over from the current I.T. company – particularly if the current company is hostile. It's disturbing to me how many I.T. companies or people will become bitter and resentful over being fired and will do things to screw up your security and create problems for the new company as a childish way of getting revenge. (Sadly, it's more common than you think.) A good I.T. company will have a process in place for handling this.

If you consider us as your next I.T. services firm, we will gladly share our new client onboarding process and documentation. I think you'll be impressed.

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Other Things To Notice And Look Out For:



Are they good at answering your questions in terms you can understand and not in arrogant, confusing “geek-speak”?

Good I.T. companies won't confuse you with techno-mumbo-jumbo, and they certainly shouldn't make you feel stupid for asking questions. All great consultants have the “heart of a teacher” and will take time to answer your questions and explain everything in simple terms. As you interact with them in the evaluation process, watch for this.

Our technicians are trained to take time to answer your questions and explain everything in simple terms. Just look at what this client had to say:



Our business has come to rely exclusively on the team at SmartPath to evaluate our needs and protect our business from an Information Technology standpoint. SmartPath has been extremely valuable to us because it allows us to focus on practicing law rather than struggling to keep up with the latest technology and maintain our computers. We no longer have to worry about keeping up with technology, because they do that for us!



– **Steve Oliver, Legal Practice Manager**
Edwards & Kautz



Do they and their technicians present themselves as true professionals when they are in your office? Do they dress professionally and show up on time?

If you'd be embarrassed if YOUR clients saw your I.T. consultant behind your desk, that should be a big red flag. How you do anything is how you do everything, so if they cannot show up on time for appointments, are sloppy with paperwork, show up unprepared, forget your requests and seem disorganized in the meeting, how can you expect them to be 100% on point with your I.T.? You can't. Look for someone else.

Our technicians are true professionals who you would be proud to have in your office. They dress professionally and show up on time, and if they cannot be there on time (for some odd, unforeseen reason), we always notify the client immediately. We believe these are minimum requirements for delivering a professional service.

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Do they have expertise in helping clients similar to you?

Do they understand how communicate, get paid, service your clients or patients and run your business? We have several small to mid your business operates the line-of-business applications you depend on? Are they familiar with how you sized business clients . The reason we work well with them is because we focus on your business, not just the technology to help prevent problems before they occur. Here's what some of our clients had to say:



We love the fact that you are a local business, who takes care of our IT needs. I was “WOW”ed with the fact I could turn the technical computer stuff over to you and know that you have my back. This allows me to concentrate on other aspects of my job. You take the time to communicate and check in with us. I feel like a partner with SmartPath, my computer is critical to the operations of this office.

- **Debbie Buchanan, Executive Administrator**
Marshall County Chamber of Commerce



“SmartPath Technologies is one of the best IT companies I have ever seen! Their customer service and response times are great, and the owners, Kristy and Willie, as well as their office staff, always make us feel like we are their #1 priority.

- **Kim Morris, Contracts Manager**
GEO Consultants, LLC



SmartPath Technologies is prompt in helping with any computer issues we may have. They contact us in person whenever we need to talk to them. They are knowledgeable and have the ability to help us operate at the standard we want.

- **John Ward, City Administrator**
Calvert City Hall



A Final Word And Free Offer To Engage With Us

I hope you have found this guide helpful in shedding some light on what to look for when hiring a professional firm to outsource your I.T. support. As I stated in the opening of this report, my purpose in providing this information is to help you make an informed decision and avoid getting burned by incompetent or unethical firms luring you in with cheap prices.

The next step is simple: call my office at 270-205-4709 and reference this letter to schedule a brief 10- to 15-minute initial consultation.

On this call we can discuss your unique situation and any concerns you have and, of course, answer any questions you have about us. If you feel comfortable moving ahead, we'll schedule a convenient time to conduct our free proprietary I.T. Systems Assessment.

This Assessment can be conducted 100% remotely with or without your current I.T. company or department knowing (we can give you the full details on our initial consultation call). **At the end of the Assessment, you'll know:**

- ✓ Where you are overpaying (or getting underserved) for the services and support you are currently getting from your current I.T. company or team.
- ✓ Whether or not your systems and data are *truly* secured from hackers and ransomware, and where you are partially or totally exposed.
- ✓ If your data is *actually* being backed up in a manner that would allow you to recover it quickly in the event of an emergency or ransomware attack.
- ✓ Where you are unknowingly violating any compliance regulations specific to your industry or susceptible to a data breach.
- ✓ How you could lower the overall costs of I.T. while improving communication, security and performance, as well as the productivity of your employees.

Fresh eyes see things that others cannot – so, at a minimum, our free Assessment is a completely cost- and risk-free way to get a credible third-party validation of the security, stability and efficiency of your I.T. systems.

To Schedule Your FREE Assessment,
please visit www.smartpathtech.com
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With appreciation,

Willie Kerns
CEO and Owner
SmartPath Technologies



A Final Word And Free Offer To Engage With Us

1

We Respond Within 5 Minutes Or Less. The average amount of time it takes for one of our clients to get on the phone with a technician who can start working on resolving their problem is 3.5 minutes. We know you're busy and we have made a sincere commitment to making sure your computer problems get fixed FAST. And since most repairs can be done remotely using our secure management tools, you don't have to wait around for a technician to show up.

2

No Geek-Speak. You deserve to get answers to your questions in PLAIN ENGLISH, not in confusing technical terms. Our technicians will also not talk down to you or make you feel stupid because you don't understand how all this "technology" works. That's our job!

3

100% No-Small-Print Satisfaction Guarantee. Quite simply, if you are not happy with our work, we'll do whatever it takes to make it right to YOUR standards without charging you for it. And if we can't make it right, the service is free.

4

All Projects Are Completed On Time And On Budget. When you hire us to complete a project for you, we won't nickel-and-dime you with unforeseen or unexpected charges or delays. We guarantee to deliver precisely what we promised to deliver, on time and on budget, with no excuses.

5

Lower Costs, Waste And Complexity With Cloud Solutions. By utilizing cloud computing and other advanced technologies, we can eliminate the cost, complexity, and problems of managing your own in-house server while giving you more freedom, lowered costs, tighter security and instant disaster recovery.

6

We Won't Hold You Hostage. Many I.T. companies do NOT provide their clients with simple and easy-to-understand documentation that outlines key network resources, passwords, licenses, etc. By keeping that to themselves, I.T. companies hold their clients "hostage" to scare them away from hiring someone else. This is both unethical and unprofessional. As a client of ours, we'll provide you with full, written documentation of your network and all the resources, software licenses, passwords, hardware, etc., in simple terms so YOU can understand it. We keep our clients by delivering exceptional service – not by keeping them in the dark.

7

Peace Of Mind. Because we monitor all our clients' networks 24/7/365, you never have to worry that a virus has spread, a hacker has broken in or a backup has failed to perform. We watch over your entire network, taking the management and hassle of maintaining it off your hands. This frees you to focus on your customers and running your business, not on your I.T. systems, security and backups.

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