

The Business Owner's IT Buyers Guide

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Why This Decision Matters More Than Most

Choosing a managed IT provider is one of the most consequential operational decisions you'll make for your business — and one of the easiest to get wrong.

The wrong IT partner costs you time. It costs you money. And it costs you sleep — in the form of outages that shouldn't have happened, security incidents that were preventable, and the grinding frustration of calling a helpdesk that doesn't know your environment.

The IT industry doesn't make this easy. Most providers pitch similar solutions, use the same acronyms, and make the same promises about response times. Differentiating them on their marketing materials alone is nearly impossible.

This guide gives you the questions to ask — and the red flags to watch for — so you're making this decision on substance, not sales polish.

Six Questions to Ask Before You Sign

1 —

"What does your response time guarantee look like — in writing?"

A real partner has service level agreements (SLAs) that define response and resolution times by issue severity, in writing, with remedies if those times aren't met. A break-fix vendor says "we'll get to it." If an IT provider can't show you a documented SLA, you don't have a guaranteed service level — you have an implied one that evaporates when you actually need it.

2 —

"How do you handle issues you prevent vs. issues I report?"

This is the question that separates proactive MSPs from reactive ones. A proactive partner should be able to tell you: "We monitor your environment 24/7 and we open tickets when we detect issues, before you call us." If the answer is primarily about how fast they respond to your calls, they're reactive — and reactive IT is just expensive break-fix with a monthly invoice.

3 —

"Who specifically will be working on my account?"

Not "our team." A name and a backup. You want to know who your primary technician is, who covers when that person is unavailable, and who your account manager is for strategic conversations. Vague answers about "our team of experts" are a signal that your account will land wherever capacity exists — not with someone who knows your environment.

4 —

"Can I speak with a current client in my industry?"

Any provider worth hiring should be able to connect you with a current client — not a testimonial on their website, but an actual phone conversation. If they hesitate, qualify it heavily, or promise to "check on that," take note. Strong IT partners have clients who are genuinely happy to take the call because the relationship is worth talking about.

5 —

"What does your onboarding process look like?"

A real partner documents your environment thoroughly before they start managing it. That means a network discovery, an asset inventory, documentation of your software stack and credentials, and a baseline security assessment. If a provider wants to start managing your systems without doing this — or if they promise to "get all that during the first month" — they're starting blind. You'll pay the cost of that in their learning curve.

6 —

"What happens if I want to leave?"

Good partners have clean offboarding. They maintain documented, organized records of your environment and are prepared to hand them over professionally if the relationship ends. Bad partners hold your documentation, passwords, and configuration details as leverage. Ask this question directly. If the answer involves anything other than "we document everything and you'd have full access immediately," get the offboarding terms in writing before you sign.

Red Flags to Watch For

- **They quote you within 24 hours without a site visit or discovery call.** IT pricing is environment-specific. A quote that arrives the same day you submitted a form wasn't based on your actual environment — it was based on a template. That quote will change once they see what they're actually dealing with.
- **The contract locks you in for three or more years with steep exit penalties.** Confidence in service quality is expressed with reasonable contract terms, not with legal barriers to leaving. Multi-year contracts with high penalties protect the provider, not you.
- **They talk about tools and products, not outcomes.** "We use SentinelOne and Datto and ConnectWise" is a product list. "We'll reduce your unplanned downtime and give you a quarterly review of your security posture" is an outcome. You want the latter — tools are the means, not the end.
- **Pricing is hourly with no monthly cap.** Hourly IT creates a misaligned incentive structure. Your provider profits more when things go wrong. Flat-fee managed services align incentives correctly: your partner makes money when your environment runs smoothly and problems are prevented, not when they're billing hours to fix incidents.
- **They can't name the compliance frameworks that apply to your industry.** If you're in healthcare, manufacturing with defense contracts, or any business that processes payment cards, your IT partner should immediately be able to tell you which compliance frameworks are relevant and how their service addresses them. Blank stares or vague answers are a signal they haven't served clients with real compliance obligations.

What Proactive Support Should Actually Include

If you're paying for a managed services agreement, here's what the monthly fee should cover — not as add-ons, but as the baseline:

- **24/7 monitoring** of your servers, endpoints, and network devices, with automated alerting and after-hours response for critical issues
- **Patch management** — operating system and third-party application patches tested and deployed on a defined schedule
- **Backup monitoring and testing** — not just running backups, but verifying they're actually restorable
- **Quarterly business reviews** — a structured conversation about what's changed in your environment, what's coming, and what your technology roadmap looks like

- **A virtual CIO (vCIO) relationship** — someone who asks about your business goals and helps you think about technology strategically, not just tactically

If the proposal you're reviewing doesn't include all of these, ask where they are. Some may be in a higher tier. But if the response is that these aren't standard — look elsewhere.

Flat-Fee vs. Hourly: The Math Is Simple

Flat-fee managed services align your IT partner's incentives with your outcomes. If they prevent problems, they keep their margin. If they let problems fester so they can bill hours, they lose their margin and eventually their client. The model rewards prevention.

Hourly IT works the opposite way. More problems mean more revenue. Prevention is a cost center. Support is a profit center. We're not saying hourly providers are deliberately negligent — but the financial incentives don't point toward proactive care, and over a multi-year relationship, that math adds up.

When comparing proposals, convert hourly quotes to an annualized estimate and compare to flat-fee. Factor in what happens during an incident — a serious breach or a major outage can generate dozens of billable hours on an hourly model, while a flat-fee provider absorbs that cost directly.

Why Quantum Technologies Built This Guide

Quantum Technologies has been protecting and supporting Wisconsin businesses for more than 13 years. We wrote this guide because we've inherited the aftermath of bad IT relationships more times than we care to count — systems that were never properly documented, backups that hadn't been tested in two years, security gaps that were never disclosed to the client.

We're not trying to win your business by making other providers look bad. We're trying to give you the tools to have a rigorous conversation with whoever you choose — including us. If you ask us these questions and we don't have good answers, you shouldn't hire us either.

A conversation costs nothing. Start there.

Talk to us — no pressure: [quantumtechnologies.com](https://www.quantumtechnologies.com) | 920-818-0900