

## 5 Tips For Working With A Managed Service Provider

**SMBs often rely on outside IT help. Here's how to get the most out of relationships with third-party providers.**

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It's no secret that smaller businesses often need a bit of outside help to get things done. That's why many of them outsource at least part of their IT function to managed service providers (MSPs) or similar firms.

But outsourcing doesn't--or at least shouldn't--mean forgetting about IT entirely. As with any other productive business relationship, small and midsize businesses (SMBs) can take some relatively pain-free steps to ensure they get the most out of their MSP. In an interview, Vince Plaza, VP of information technology at [TeamLogic IT](#), served up five tips for doing just that. Plaza's firm is a national IT provider that focuses on SMBs.

**1. Develop trust by asking questions.** For some SMBs, the appeal of managed IT services is the ability to offload a critical business need and focus finite resources elsewhere in the company. But owners and executives that completely turn off their brain's tech sector are setting themselves up for frustration. Plaza said trust between company stakeholders and the MSP is key--and notes that trust is built, not bought. The most straightforward path to an honest relationship: Ask questions of any prospective MSP early and often.

What kind of infrastructure, applications, and other technologies do they typically support? What kind of tools do they use internally for things like helpdesk and other functions? Are their written agreements easy to read? How do they respond to different types of customer requests? And so forth. Don't just take answers at face value: Do a bit of homework (the Web makes this fairly easy) to ensure you understand and are comfortable with their approach. Don't worry--you need not get stuck in the weeds.

"I would like to find out from the partners I might be engaging with: What are you using to deliver this to me?" Plaza said. "I don't need the gory details."

An example: If you're potentially interested in [desktop virtualization](#), ask prospective MSPs if and how they support virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI). They might only support certain vendors--say VMware, but not Citrix or Hyper-V--or might not have much VDI expertise at all. Better to find that out now.

**2. Treat your MSP as a virtual CIO--even if you are the CIO.**

For some SMBs, the decision to outsource is fairly simple because there is no internal IT department. For others--especially growing and midsize firms--there's likely at least one (if not more) people charged with managing the company's technology. Don't let that cause territorial fears around job security--this inevitability leads to negative outcomes.

Clearly define roles and responsibilities up front. A good MSP will be willing to defer to an in-house IT executive, without stepping on toes. Let them know how they can best do that. Plaza gave as examples work overflows, vacation coverage, and other supporting roles--or the "call on us when you need us" approach. Avoiding an adversarial position from the outset will give the MSP a chance to prove its value--and if it doesn't, you'll be able to make an informed, well-reasoned change.

**3. Communicate on a regular basis.** Speaking of open communication: Plaza recommends meeting on a regular basis. This doesn't mean daily or even weekly--you can still realize the upside in outsourcing and focus your energies elsewhere. But treat your MSP in a similar manner to an internal department. Keep them in the loop as appropriate about strategic plans, changes, and other information that could impact the company's technology needs. Doing so enables the MSP to anticipate and adapt rather than constantly play catch-up. Plaza suggested monthly or quarterly reviews, though the timetable will depend on your business.

"Make sure that things are running fine, the managed services are delivering what they're supposed to, and that any issues that have come up are addressed," Plaza said. "Also use that as an opportunity to discuss: What's the next phase of your business?"

**4. Prioritize security.** According to Plaza, one of the biggest technology risks inside SMBs today is security--or lack of it. Among other problems, this can lead to the MSP spending countless hours addressing security issues that result from a lack of awareness or care. They could be using those resources in more strategic ways on your behalf.

"The SMB owner has to have some level of comfort with security and wanting to bring to their business the type of security that typically you'd see in the large enterprise," Plaza said.

He doesn't mean you have to spend money like a larger company, but rather adopt similar policies and procedures. Even if you outsource some or all of your IT needs, smart security starts internally. (Don't know where to start? Consider these [four basic steps](#) toward better security.)

**5. Act fast if problems surface.** Ideally, regular communication will minimize potential problems with your outside IT provider. But things never go perfectly to plan, do they? If issues do arise, address them immediately with the provider. "Bring it up right away so that the MSP has some way of looking at the situation--and the proper amount of time to provide answers and mitigate whatever it was," Plaza said.

Raising issues quickly and escalating--and giving them an appropriate amount of time to be resolved--will often lead to a positive resolution. And if it doesn't, you--and the MSP--will have hard evidence that it might be time to explore other options.

"Hopefully, it doesn't get to that point," Plaza said. "When it does, you've done what you can to ensure it's an amicable split and you can fire your MSP without incurring a lot of pain."

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