



Why many small to medium-sized businesses are moving to an external model for IT network & infrastructure support



There have been several recent articles written by consultants and audit firms strongly advising small to medium-sized businesses to consider taking advantage of IT support from external suppliers, especially technical proactive support for networks, servers and desktops.

Complex IT solutions are the kinds of things that can give a business nightmares. From specifying what you need through to implementing and supporting it. Time spent on IT is time you could spend on customer service and new business.

In business you wouldn't contemplate not having insurance: - well just like insurance, knowing that you have a competent support contractor to call on in times of need gives a tremendous amount of peace of mind, not only by promptly resolving problems as they arise but ensuring that there is a planned maintenance program for business continuity.

In this paper we look at the approach to this service model, support contact considerations and what your responsibilities are once the contract is in place.

The business case

It is the business priorities that will drive IT requirements, and there are significant benefits to be derived by entrusting network & infrastructure support to the experts.

A managed service is designed to keep your IT systems running reliably, relieving you of the chore of day-to-day maintenance and end-user support, freeing up time and space for your in-house IT team (if you have one) to focus on what you do best.

The business case will be a combination of a number of factors, and weighted according to each situation. In our experience the main compelling reasons for businesses to opt for an IT support contract are as follows:

- No relevant IT skills or limited IT skills
- Existing IT skills required for more critical or higher value activities
- Justification on efficiencies & cost savings
- Justification on risk assessment & business continuity
- More skilled, qualified & experienced personnel – (e.g. Microsoft certified)

- No contingency for staff leaving, maternity, holidays, sickness etc.
- Access to a virtual IT team – knowledge bank
- Added value services: security, disaster recovery, anti spam, mobile, CRM, virtualisation, remote storage etc.

Customer satisfaction surveys of businesses that use external support concluded that the majority were very satisfied with the model, perceived value for money and intended to continue the arrangement.

Each support contract will be tailored for the particular needs of the business, and the costs will be based on a number of factors including the complexity of the infrastructure, number of servers, desktop devices etc., locations (home office, mobile) and the service level agreement (SLA),

However as a rough guide the monthly support costs typically range from **£200 - £3000 per month.**

B2 – Customer Story

A progressive and independent firm of accountants & tax advisers based in Liverpool approached B2 for external IT support. The requirement was for a support agreement to cover 2 servers, 35 desktop devices, mobile devices and their business systems - Sage and Iris.

B2 responded with a blended agreement including unlimited telephone and remote access support, proactive system maintenance and backups, and regular on-site support. Recently the firm successfully upgraded their servers and PC's over a weekend, ready to start work on Monday - a project not possible without the planning and assistance from B2.

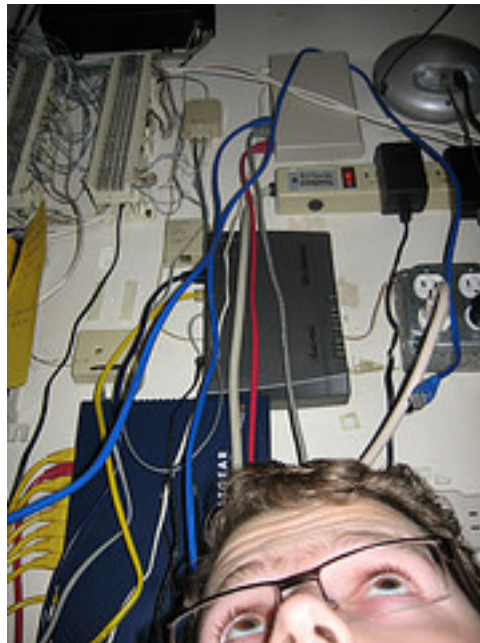
The customer is delighted with the service that they are receiving, and appreciates the value - **for £1000 per month** they get all the support they need and more, for a fraction of the cost of employing dedicated IT staff. Plus they also have access to a virtual IT team of talented individuals with an impressive “knowledge bank”.

Note: An IT specialist can command an annual salary in the region of £25k – £35k plus loaded costs.

Getting started - find out what you have

If you don't already have one, you'll need to draw up an inventory of your equipment and the software that you use. If you aren't sure of the specification of the machines or the operating software and application software in use, then running specialist products such as Belarc and Network Asset Tracker Pro will provide you with a complete list of hardware and software. These utility products can automatically

create an accurate and up-to-date central repository consisting of detailed hardware, software and security configurations.



This process will also facilitate software license compliance, hardware upgrade planning, cyber security status, information assurance audits, IT asset management, configuration management, and more.

Don't forget to include your peripherals like printers and scanners and any network components such as hubs, switches, firewalls, uninterruptible power supplies, ADSL routers, wireless access points, etc.

The main focus on most agreements centres on server and desktop support, functioning across LAN's and WAN's

It is good practice to work together with the supplier to perform an initial audit and scoping for the hardware, software, email, internet, intranet and other service components across all site locations, including home office and mobile workers.

What equipment, software and services are to be covered

Using the inventory of items of equipment such as servers, desktops, laptops, printer's etc. evaluate the candidates to be covered under the support contract, and work with the supplier to discuss the options. The supplier should clearly state the support arrangements for pre-existing equipment, equipment that they provide and equipment purchased in the future from another party. If there is a limit to the age of equipment that will be supported this should be clearly stated, and also some minor equipment may be excluded.

Hardware specifications Servers, desktops and laptops	Operating systems Windows XP, Vista, Windows 7
Application software: Microsoft Office, CRM, Sage, Iris, Windows remote access	Scope of desktop support
Scope of server applications & operating systems Microsoft small business server, Windows server, SQL server, shared fax service, Microsoft office outlook, Microsoft SharePoint services, remote web workplace, IIS server, NT backup, Backup Exec, ArcServe, Blackberry Enterprise Server, Terminal services	Main exclusions
Scope of server support	Scope of security, antivirus & anti spam support
Scope of internet support	Scope of home working & mobile support
Scope of email support	

What to expect in a support contract

There are certain things that you should expect to be included in a support contract. Contracts will set out the delivery and quality processes together with the expectations of both the supplier and the customer. At this point both parties will have a clear understanding of the key components and conditions of the contract. This is paramount as the customer will be relying on the supplier to manage critical aspects of their ICT and both parties need to know that the partnership will operate within the spirit of the agreement.

The support agreement will be individually tailored to your specific needs and should contain a blended mix of a standard delivery package, remote and on-site support, and a framework for chargeable activities using either a call-off arrangement or hourly/ daily rates.

A key element of the delivery is the supplier's Service Desk: it not only handles incidents, problems and questions but also provides an interface for other activities such as change requests, configuration management, availability management, and IT services continuity.

The main contract elements should include the following:

Period of the contract	Pre-existing faults
Single contact-point details	Change control
Costs and payment terms	Release categories
General terms & conditions, insurance etc.	Service level agreement
Inclusions & exclusions	Service desk functions - request logging, process & escalation
Supplier & customer responsibilities	Reviews & reporting and procedures for resolving issues, complaints and disputes

What are the customer responsibilities

A support contract will only be successful if it fulfils the customer's expectations. Therefore, in order to maximise the benefits from having a support contract the customer must work in partnership with the supplier and accept certain responsibilities including:

Understanding and complying with the support contract – terms, inclusions, exclusions, costs etc.	Providing adequate protection for systems including UPS, antivirus software, anti spam, and a firewall
Appointing a designated contact within the organisation	Carry out some basic fault identification / troubleshooting
Perform agreed housekeeping tasks	Giving the support company advance warning of any issues prior to site visits
Not making system changes without the prior notice/consent of the supplier	Making designated person available during site visits
Providing the supplier with the security and remote access permissions	

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About - B2 Business Systems - Microsoft Certified Gold Partner

Established in 1991, B2 is an independent company, providing solutions and services, focused around our core competencies, including a comprehensive range of solutions that streamline business processes including document management, office equipment and consumables through to complete IT systems and networks.

B2 was founded on principles of providing businesses a quality service coupled with a superior level of customer care, and our reputation for providing this has undoubtedly been an attraction to new customers. Our existing customers are equally important to us though, and they will continue to benefit from the same exceptional level of customer care that they have since day one

Many of our customers benefit from reduced costs by using our IT support framework. B2 addresses their IT needs, whilst ensuring that our skill sets are optimised to deliver tangible results and a complete front to back solution for our customers.

B2 is headquartered just outside Chester at Deeside, Flintshire, with an additional office in Bangor, providing business support to over 1200 customers in North Wales and the North West. Recognised by Flintshire Business Awards 2009 - B2 won both the Employer of the Year and Innovation awards. B2 employ 30 staff, with revenues in excess of £3.5m.



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