

Who's your IT expert?

When it comes to making important decisions about technology, you may not have the time to research the options or the resources to devote staff to the task. You resort to taking advice from friends and relatives, or simply do nothing. Finding an expert to look after your IT instead will save you time, money and anguish.

"Being on top of all the technology necessary to run a business effectively requires you to be a jack-of-all-trades," says Simon Bullock, IT manager at the urban and landscape design firm Gillespies in Oxford.

IT Man and Tea-maker

It's almost inevitable that on day one, you'll be the IT man as well as the salesman and tea-maker for your business! You'll need to fend for yourself in the technology jungle, not because you want to, but because saving money is the priority. Don't worry: you're not on your own:

- Don't forget that your hardware and even software should include some sort of support or warranty package. On hardware, it's worth the £70 or so for an on-site maintenance warranty (beware "RTB" deals: RTB means "Return to base"- it costs less, but a courier will simply pick up your PC, and you'll be left high and dry for up to 3 weeks). Similarly, look for technical support which doesn't come with a premium rate phone tariff. Microsoft Office software includes a number of free support calls; many other manufacturers will do the same.
- Online support is available in scoops. Not only are there plenty of dedicated resources (like Microsoft Office Online, TechNet and CNet), but even before you buy a product there is now a growing number of self-help forums (PC Advisor is recommended) where someone is likely to have posted the solution to any problem you may happen to face. These forums are also full of honest advice from consumers and businesses alike.

It's probably unrealistic, however, to believe you can take your business to the next level- fitting servers, backups, internet connections and new computers- all on your own. Bullock says there are usually clear early signs that your business needs help with IT:

- frequent computer crashes that cause downtime and affect productivity
- staff who dabble at fixing problems and actually make problems worse
- the various systems you've cobbled together just aren't working together
- you need to upgrade your technology, but don't know where to start.

One-off and contract IT partners

If these ring bells with you, it's time to call in professional help. You have a couple of alternatives.

Short-term, you could pay an IT consultant to fix what's wrong on a piecemeal basis. If technology isn't central to the way you run your business, that may well suffice: but it's expensive in the long run.

If IT is crucial to your success, then you probably need to look beyond the one-man band approach by establishing a longer term contract arrangement with a local IT solutions provider. Not only will you get decent support, but you'll have the commitment of someone who is concerned about your business as you are.

"There are several factors worth considering when selecting an IT partner, but at the end of the day, finding the right match for your business may well come down to your gut feel," says Bullock. "You need to find an outfit you can trust to do what's best for your business. After all, you're using them because you don't have the time or expertise to assess solutions yourself. So you need to convey to them what you're trying to achieve, what your budget will allow and be able to trust their recommendations." He says there are several factors to discuss:

- Their references: begin by asking the opinion of customers who use their services.

- Their location: preferably a local firm who can be on-site at a moment's notice.
- Their experience: ask them about their experience of working with operations like yours. Ask about their qualifications in systems you use or are considering. If you use industry-specific applications, assess their experience in those areas.
- Their support: Find out if they can train and support your team as they learn new systems. Will they be available quickly if you need them? Will they have adequate backup to meet your needs during holidays or if your account manager goes sick? When all's said and done, what you want is peace of mind, so make sure your chosen suppliers can deliver it.

When you're satisfied with the consultant's proposals, make sure a contract's drawn up, itemising exactly what is to be done and specifying dates, deadlines, equipment and so on. Your consultant should provide this- it's often called an "SLA" or Service Level Agreement. That way, both parties know the obligations and what should happen in the event of a dispute. Scrutinise the small print carefully.

The in-house IT expert

A step up from outside help is to take on internal IT staff. If technology represents a major part of your daily operations and future plans, then an in-house IT staffer makes a great deal of sense. "There are businesses where computers are little more than word processors, but if you run a firm like ours where you're using computer-aided design and sharing lots of files on a daily basis, an in-house IT person is advisable," says Bullock.

"Some would argue that having an in-house IT person is needlessly expensive. Having been both sides of the fence, I tend to disagree. If you track how much you're laying out for outside help, there will simply come a time when it's cheaper to add one more salary to your wage bill. You might also consider combining IT responsibilities with other duties if your IT systems aren't big enough to warrant a full-time job."

Whichever option you choose, the sooner you can stop taking care of technology by yourself, the better. Bullock believes a savvy IT partner can not only save your business money on firefighting emergencies, but also help you make further economies by getting better deals on products, maintenance and other requirements. Moreover, they will have a more intimate knowledge of your business. "Above all, you'll have peace of mind knowing that you're in more control of your own future."

For more advanced assistance, call PC Pal today on 01603 766716

From <http://www.microsoft.com/uk/smallbusiness/starting/it-essentials/technology-essentials/who-is-your-information-technology-expert.msp>