

DEMYSTIFYING IT MANAGED SERVICES

BY ERIC HOFFMASTER

IT managed services can sometimes seem to be a vague or confusing concept. Different managed services providers will bundle different services, while others offer various levels of service, such as silver, gold, platinum or other names that explain and mean nothing to a law firm. Amidst this stormy sea of offerings, how do you know how to select the right provider and contract to elevate your business and sail into clear waters?

What is IT Managed Services?

Simply put, IT managed services is the practice of outsourcing technology management and services. It can include proactive monitoring, technical support, security audits, training, virtual CIO services and more.

Why would your firm derive value from managed services? Firms of all sizes and practice areas can benefit from managed services. The cost to employ a mid- to high-level IT support employee may exceed \$100,000 per year, depending on your location. That person can't be reasonably available 24/7/365, nor will one individual likely have the depth of knowledge or skills required to support numerous technologies. You may even have a department with several IT staff members—each with his or her area of responsibility and expertise—and still not have enough knowledge or capacity to provide adequate support around the clock. Additionally, all firms need proactive monitoring of servers, network infrastructure (firewalls, switches, routers, storage, etc.) and workstations. The cost to implement and maintain a best-of-breed in-house solution is prohibitive for a single environment.

An IT managed services provider invests significant time and money to develop technologies, processes and staff to support numerous clients. These economies of scale enable firms to leverage expertise and technology at a fraction of the required investments of internal technology and engineering talent. Providers are uniquely positioned to seamlessly extend your existing IT support staff, providing advanced tools and expert-level knowledge along with around-the-clock support. Predictable, consistent support from the managed services provider in conjunction with consistent, budgeted IT operating expenses provides the best of both worlds. This creates a partnership between the firm and provider that ensures a trusted-advisor relationship.

Choosing an IT Managed Services Contract

There are a variety of IT managed services offerings, and different providers offer varying services, models and costs. The key to success is understanding how a contract fits within your firm's financial and technological needs, blending a balanced financial and strategic relationship. Law firms can expect one or more of these contract options:

- Bundled services, where you choose from a “tier” or “program” that includes the services you want.
- *A la carte* menu of services where you choose services.
- Fixed price per-X, which is all-inclusive with unlimited support.

Choosing an appropriate contract type is crucial, and each type has significant benefits in different scenarios.

Bundled Services

Bundled services contracts are beneficial when each item in the bundle fits your firm's needs, and the provider usually incentivizes costs associated with bundles. However, in order to achieve cost reductions, bundles frequently include services that can be unnecessary.

A la carte

The *a la carte* contract enables a high degree of customization, allowing a selection of specific services. The program(s) frequently include cost reductions with multiple services selections. For smaller firms that have simple needs for technology management and support, this enables a cost-effective method for the selection of specific items. For larger firms that may want a variety of services and/or support, this gives the firm the flexibility to choose only what they need. Flexibility and customization are the major benefits of this contract type.

Fixed Price

Fixed price per-X is a recent entry into the IT managed services portfolio that provides unlimited support for a fixed price, typically allocated on a per-user or per-device basis. This model is typically all-inclusive of remote support, proactive monitoring and may include optional services such as security monitoring, disaster recovery planning and virtual CIO services. There are usually exclusions to unlimited support, which may include on-site visits, project work, third-party support and others. Reviewing exclusions is critical when selecting this option. Exclusions are generally supported at an hourly rate outside of the contract and require appropriate management. You should be aware of any technology prerequisites to this contract as well.

A fixed-price contract offers a worry-free IT experience and allows a firm to establish a set monthly IT budget. This approach enables a predictable and stable operational expense and has become a more prevalent and practical option.

Choosing an IT Managed Services Provider

Choosing the right provider of managed services is equally important to, if not more important than choosing the right contract. While the underlying technology remains relatively common, the legal industry requires white-glove service and expertise that is a world apart from other industries. Legal-specific applications, such as document and case management systems, forms and calendaring software, custom macros and templates, document comparison tools, and litigation support/e-discovery software are unique to the legal industry and require specialized training and expertise. Most law firms have specific requirements that vary by practice area, with a focus that leans primarily towards transactional or litigation work.

Legal Industry Experience

Choosing an IT managed services provider that has deep experience in the legal industry is paramount. Not doing so could be compared to selecting a screwdriver to hammer nails – the job may get done, but it will be messy and someone could be injured. The provider should have knowledge around how a law firm functions, supporting a client-matter based environment and display deep understanding around supporting systems and industry-specific applications used within your firm. Choose a provider with a proven track record of success in the legal industry and similar environments to your own. The technology partner should supply numerous law firm client references that are willing to entertain a conversation with their peers.

Invested in Your Success

A top-tier IT managed services provider should deliver more than just technical support. They should be invested in the long-term success of your firm and leverage technology to help you deliver on your firm's strategic objectives. Virtual CIO services are a great way to strategize with your vendor on long-term business goals and technology. They may also provide a consistent review of your current environment and technical issues. The provider should also demonstrate a well-established support portfolio that includes a dedicated support department, published service level agreements (SLAs), reporting services that provide environment visibility and references for clients where 24/7/365 support is consistently delivered.

Staff and Technology

When choosing a provider, it is also important to consider the technical aptitude of their staff and the technologies employed in supporting your firm. Things to look for are software support expertise, technical and vendor certifications, vendor partnerships, customized proactive monitoring tools, industry-recognized software and more. The vendor should possess the technical ability to deliver the services your firm requires.

Key factors to choosing a strong IT managed services partner are:

- Legal industry experience
- Track record of success in similar firms
- Invested in long-term success of and relationship with your firm
- Consultant mindset—more than just issue resolution and support
- Established and documented support procedures
- Routine reports on your environment and their support of your firm
- Technical aptitude of staff to support your firm
- Industry-recognized software and hardware partnerships

IT managed services doesn't have to be complicated. In fact, it can be a practical option for firms to outsource the majority of their technology management and services, including proactive monitoring, technical support, security audits, training, virtual CIO services and more. The most progressive firms today are carefully reviewing service offerings and evaluating providers for legal industry experience before making the switch to a managed services plan. With managed services in place, law firms can get back to the business of delivering high-quality legal services.

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