



The Nonprofit Guide to Vetting a Managed IT Service Provider

12 Questions to Evaluate Service
Quality and Fit



If your nonprofit is considering managed IT services, it's critical to work with a company that can provide high-quality service that fits.

It can also be difficult to evaluate whether a provider will be able to do that.

“Managed services” can mean different things to different people. To understand what a provider is offering – and whether they’ll be able to deliver – here are 12 questions to ask.

These questions can help you start to evaluate an MSP for service quality and fit.



1

Can you give me a reference (preferably a nonprofit organization similar to mine)?

You're trying to determine two things here: First, have they worked with nonprofits at all – and, more specifically, nonprofits like yours? Have they worked with nonprofits that use the same technology platforms you do? Second, are their customers happy with their work?

Of course, any service provider is going to give you good references only. Realizing this, often people contact references only late in the process, once they are fairly sure in their choice. By requesting and speaking to references at the beginning, you can gain valuable insight into the kinds of customers who are happy with this MSP, and gauge whether your organization will fit that profile.

For a more complete picture, you may want to ask to speak to a referral who has recently left the MSP. And you may also want to ask what their customer churn rate is (the number of customers they lose in a year); that answer tends to be revealing in itself. If the MSP is reluctant to give you referrals up front, it's fair to wonder what they are afraid their clients will say.

2

Who will answer the phone when I call?

One of the biggest complaints nonprofits have with help desks is that they're often staffed with low-level technicians who aren't equipped to answer substantial questions. This can make getting support a slow and frustrating process. Ask how often calls are escalated and how often helpdesk technicians are able to solve them on their own (known as "first call resolution"). Also ask if the help desk is staffed in house or outsourced to a third-party provider.

The help desk staff will be the first and probably only contact most of your staff has with your MSP. Follow up with their references to get a feel for the general attitude of their help desk support toward client calls.

3

Who will visit my location when onsite support is scheduled?

You want to know if you will see a different person each time, or if you will have a steady technical presence who will get to know your organization well. Will the company send the first person available? When the tech has to call for backup support, what timeline is acceptable? Are IT issues resolved within hours, days, weeks? How often will an onsite support tech be scheduled? Since onsite support is expensive compared to an off-site help desk, what are the parameters and pricing for onsite support?

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What's the average length of time your techs have been with you?

The longer the provider's techs have been with the company, the better. High turnover (or even just an abundance of new techs because of growth) means that you probably won't often get the same people working with you. And you're less likely to get techs with great expertise. This can impact the quality of support. Some changes in your support are to be expected, but a culture of high turnover probably indicates other issues at the MSP.

5

How does your pricing work?

It seems like most MSPs won't give you a quote until they talk to you. Even under a supposedly simple pricing model, pricing can be tricky. And misunderstandings about pricing can be costly and create distrust. Your MSP probably also wants to avoid miscommunication – so if you have any questions on pricing, be sure to satisfy yourself before the bills come.

Are there any fees – like setup or technology licensing – that aren't covered in the monthly cost? Are you paying for a package of service hours or for something else? Is emergency support extra? Ask them to walk through their pricing structure in as much detail as they can, giving real scenarios from existing clients where possible.

6

How will the onboarding process be run?

Onboarding will be the first time your staff interact with the new MSP – and the impression they get will reflect on your MSP choice. You should ask: Who will manage onboarding, and will they remain involved once service is begun? How long does onboarding take? What technology is involved? What training will be provided to your staff (for example on how to contact the new help desk provider.) How will the new MSP interact with your nonprofit executives?

If they are providing any strategic technology planning, the executive-level contact will be as important as the help desk personnel.

7

How will you work with my team?

Here, you're trying to get a feel for what will be required on your end. Will you need a dedicated point of contact (like an office administrator or IT manager)? How will your users be trained? How will your users contact support?

If you have an existing internal IT team, now is the time to delineate how they'll factor into your managed support. This is also a question to follow up on with their references. How do they actually work with clients?



8

How will you report on your work?

You want to know how you will manage their work outcomes. You shouldn't be asked to view your MSP as a kind of "black box" where magic happens. How will you be able to keep track of the value you're getting? Will you have the ability to review the state of your systems? In real time?

Generally, a regular reporting cadence is helpful in keeping services aligned with your mission and goals. You should ask to see a sample report to get clarity on what this will include. You should also ask their references about their transparency and attitude. Mistakes happen; natural disasters and cybersecurity hacks occur, despite everyone's best efforts. Find out from their references: How did this MSP report on and respond to problems?

9

What are some of the vendors and technologies you work with?

You may be seeking an MSP to take over supporting your existing technology platforms. You may be seeking an MSP to offer strategic planning advice, or to help with a software selection process. Whatever the case, you absolutely need to know whether your MSP has a financial incentive to steer you into their vendor partner platforms or software. Will they guide projects toward the best fit for your needs, or will they steer you into lucrative deals for themselves?

Beyond this basic question of financial interests, you need to know if they work with your existing technology. Many "industry standard" platforms deliver great value to nonprofits. In addition, many have nonprofit discount licenses or donation programs. Ask if your prospective MSP has experience partnering with nonprofit IT programs. How active are they in the nonprofit technology community?

Beyond that, ask how knowledgeable they are about diverse technologies in this field, including new offerings. Can they guide you to valuable services while helping you avoid investing in unproven start-ups? Do they take a cookie-cutter approach to all their clients? While many nonprofits use standard platforms like Microsoft or Google, how familiar is this MSP with supporting nonprofit specific software for fundraising or client management?

10

How will you implement cybersecurity?

You need to know what level of cybersecurity the MSP provides. Nonprofits are just as vulnerable to hacks and scams as businesses. You need to ask how the MSP will respond to suspected attacks, how they'll guard against attacks, and what your staff will need to do to protect your organization and themselves. This is another area where some MSPs can adopt a "you wouldn't understand, just trust us" attitude. Ask questions until you feel confident in the ability of your organization to partner with your MSP in enacting basic safeguards.

11

How will you help my organization strategize for the future?

Some managed service providers are capable of resolving day-to-day IT support tasks but lack the capacity to engage strategically and proactively. Ask potential providers where your systems should be headed, what issues they could see cropping up within the next few years, and what solutions they envision being enacted. What nonprofit technology trends are they following?

12

How do you deliver value?

This open-ended question should give you an interesting glimpse into how the provider perceives their own role. If they focus on talking about how they'll help you avoid downtime or eliminate annoying issues, they're probably more of a ticket master than a strategist. If they talk about helping your organization accomplish its mission with better solutions, they probably take a more strategic, long-term approach.

In general, it's a bad sign if they struggle to come up with an answer – and a good sign if they talk about communication and transparency in addressing your needs.

Looking for a Managed Service Provider You Can Trust?

Hopefully, these questions are helpful as you evaluate service providers. If you're looking for more help, let's talk.

At Community IT Innovators, we've exclusively served nonprofits for 25 years, empowering them to accomplish their missions with better IT support.

We have low technician turnover and certifications across all major platforms. And we're strategic, tactical, and tailored to you; we constantly research and evaluate new technologies to ensure that you get cutting-edge solutions that are crafted to the needs of your organization.

We'd love to talk through any of the questions on this list with you in detail, or to discuss any other questions you might have around managed services.

If you're looking for a managed services provider you can trust, **contact us at 202.234.1600 or [online](#)**. One of our consultants will be in touch quickly to talk through your needs.



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