

Technology Matters

How to Select a Computer Geek
by Lance Plumbee



Few business people will dispute the power of technology. However, most believe that they are under-utilizing their information technology resources, including computer hardware, software, and hand-held devices. Therefore, the question becomes, "How do I select an information technology (IT) provider who will help me maximize my technology investment?"

Most of us have at least one account of a "computer guy" who did some work for us and was "never heard from again." In almost every case, the cost of addressing the problem created by the lone computer guy is more than the cost of the original work. Compounding one's frustration is the fact that most of us don't know enough about information technology to understand what is going on. No one wants to feel helpless when the stability of our business is at stake. So, let's explore some steps that you can take to make sure that you choose an IT provider that is a good fit for your company.

ARE THEY KNOWLEDGEABLE?

Professional qualifications and designations are a consideration when choosing an IT provider. However, there are a lot of folks out there who are MCPs (Microsoft Certified Professionals) and MCSEs (Microsoft Certified System Engineer) who have never configured or maintained a functioning business network. Technically, any IT pro worth their salt should be proficient in a few key areas including:

- An understanding of databases, particularly your software, contact management, and accounting databases, and how to import and export data from these systems.
- A strong background in local area network configuration and administration, including how to setup and administer user accounts.
- A fundamental understanding of FTP (file transfer protocol).

GET REFERENCES

You might say, "I'm a property manager. How am I supposed to know if my guy is qualified in these areas?" The short answer is this: you ask for references. Talk with other business owners, preferably other property managers, about their experiences with the provider in question. The more references the better. If their business is similar in size and scope to yours, then your fellow business owner's experience is probably a good indicator of what you can expect from the IT professional.

THE ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE

The ability to communicate effectively is another requirement. You probably would not work with a plumber if he could not explain the nature of the problem with your pipes and the steps that he took to fix the problem, so why should the criteria be any different for an IT professional? There is nothing mystical about computing, and a good IT professional should be able to explain, in layman's terms, the work performed and the effect on your day-to-day business operations. You may also want to ask for a written outline of their services and a statement of how they feel that these services might benefit your organization.

PRICING OF SERVICES

You should discuss hourly rates and general availability up front, so that there are no surprises when services are rendered. Computing problems can be stressful, and you do not want to be haggling over rates in the middle of a hardware or software crisis. Make your expectations clear up front. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Remember, you are paying for these services, so it is your right to understand the work that is being done and how it will affect your business.

CONCLUSION

Companies with less than 30 workstations generally do not need a full-time IT professional. That means that most of us will be faced with the decision of choosing an IT provider at some point during the life of our business.



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