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## The Case for Out Sourcing IT Support for Small Businesses

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### What is the Job Description for IT Support?

One goal for properly managed IT is to improve the productivity of the company.

All business investment must provide a return. One return for IT support is found in a smoothly running network that is not experiencing problems. It is difficult to be productive when the machines you need to perform your work are not functioning properly.

Another return is implementing new technology to improve business processes. Utilizing technology to cut steps out of the process or to improve your communication with customers or business partners has huge impacts on productivity.

Another goal must be to maintain the security of your network environment and your data. The benefit of being able to connect anyone to anything brings with it the risk of disruption of business through the random or intentional efforts of people both outside and inside of your organization.

The expense of fixing damage caused by poor security is potentially dwarfed by the compromising of sensitive information and company secrets. Losing closely guarded secrets that find their way into the wrong hands because of poorly designed or implemented security can be a very expensive learning experience.

### But Why Outsource?

Reason 1 - Hard Cost

It takes a great deal of skill to be effective at providing support and the person that possesses that skill is an expensive person. The salary, benefits and other overhead of a skilled technician can easily be \$70,000 - \$80,000 per year.

If you are paying your support person significantly less than that it is a good bet that he/she does not possess the skills that you really need. If the technician lacks the skills he may be able to muddle through the problem and figure it out eventually, but at what cost in time and lost productivity of the users?

A good support company's technicians see a variety of issues at many different companies. They share their solutions and can often solve problems quickly. If they can't solve it themselves they have resources from the company and other sources to draw on to fix the problem.

Time is money and less cost per hour doesn't equal less total cost. A skilled technician can do in ten hours a week what a semi skilled technician takes all week to do. Which is the better value?

### Reason 2 - Versatility

Another issue is skill sets. Technicians, like lawyers, have areas of specialty and often times a single technician's skills do not cover every need. When you hire a company you get the aggregate skills of that company usually at no extra cost.

The ability to put the right person on the job translates into not only a quicker job but also a job well done.

### Reason 3 - A Poor Hiring Choice

A potential giant cost is hiring the wrong in-house support technician. What happens if you hire someone who represents himself as having certain skills but doesn't?

Usually the person doing the hiring cannot really tell if the applicant actually has the skills he purports to have. If a lie is told and the person is hired what usually happens is nothing - at least right away.

If the person is completely incompetent he usually gets replaced pretty quickly, but if he has marginal skills, what usually happens is that the network degrades slowly over time until a tipping event occurs and the person is fired. This assumes it was in good shape when the hire took place.

A not so unusual example of the tipping event is a severe server crash (say from a hard drive failure) and it is only then discovered that the tape backups have not been running properly for several months and the last good backup is six months old. The person is fired but the damage is done.

Even in the absence of the tipping event eventually the complaints of poor performance and problems grow to the point where the hired technician is sent packing. Meanwhile the company experiences the loss of productivity from a poorly performing network.

Good support companies provide supervision of their employees and have the necessary skills to evaluate their work. They also have a long term financial incentive to provide quality service to their customers.

#### Reason 4 - Scalability

There are often two or three events per year that require several hands to complete in a timely manner. An example of this would be a move to new facilities or an upgrade and change out of a large number of workstations. A support company can provide a number of skilled technicians to get this work done in a timely fashion.

Often companies experience bulges of growth from getting a large job that lasts for several months. They add infrastructure to sustain the growth, only to have the added work and need for the infrastructure go away at the end of the job. The scalability of your outsourced support company allows you to increase your support and expense for the period of the bulge, and then shed it when the job is finished.

#### Reason 5 - The Not so Hard Cost

In the computer industry change is fast and furious. There isn't really a learning curve for the skill set; it's more of a vertical line. The skills you learn today are mostly useless three years from today and almost totally so in five years.

The way you maintain your skills is to be constantly training on new products and technologies, which translates into hard out of pocket training costs for classes and seminars, or soft costs from not taking advantage of productivity advances of new technologies because you are unaware or lack the skills utilize them.

Tech support is an on going training and certification process. Training takes place in both formal classroom and informal on the job (with supervision) environments. Knowledge is shared among technicians so a gain in knowledge by one technician is a gain by all.

Outside support companies work for many customers and implement many new technologies. They also see how these technologies impact business the process and can translate that new understanding into useful implementation ideas for your company. A good support company not only does what you ask them to, but they suggest new ways to improve what you are already doing.

#### Reason 6 - I don't like my Technician

Occasionally the company support person suffers from the "what did he say?" syndrome. If you ask them a simple, or possibly not so simple, question you are treated to a ten minute monologue that is delivered with a condescending attitude, then you walk away wondering what he said and why you asked.

There must be a reason they do this, but this is beside the point. The real question is why put up with it?

Out sourcing your support makes it easy to resolve this kind of problem. If you are unhappy with your support person for any reason, you simply request a new technician. If you are unhappy with the company you change companies.

This is easily done without affecting your employment compensation rate.

This kind of flexibility makes it easy to try out both technicians and companies, and when you find a good fit you can keep them around.

### Reason 7 - Better service

When your in-house technician is on vacation do you hunt them down to answer a question or take care of a problem? Probably not, but you do experience the impulse to try to find them, and the more important the issue the more likely you are to actually make the call.

When you have outsourced your support to a company, even though you are assigned an individual technician who does go on vacation, you always have support coverage. A good support company will make sure that more than one technician is familiar with a customers environment and will be able to take over with little or no disruptions.

Similarly when an in-house technician leaves there is either an overlap period where the outgoing technician "trains" the incoming technician (doubling the cost for that period), or the incoming technician arrives blind after the outgoing technician leaves, and has to learn "on the job".

There are no gaps in coverage or in the quality of coverage when a good outside Support Company is used. If a technician is leaving the support company a different one is assigned to the account, trained on the environment and up to speed before the other one leaves.

### **Summary**

Many companies make a choice to hire a full time technician based on the premise that I can get a full week of support for the same cost as a partial week. This is a false argument.

If you take the reasoning already expressed in this document into consideration it is much more likely that the better choice is to out source your support.

When hiring a support company insist that the initial 60 - 90 days of support be considered a trial period. This will give you have a chance to evaluate the company's performance without penalty.

Even if you mistakenly hire the wrong company, this mistake can be quickly and inexpensively corrected.