



5 questions every SME owner should ask their IT manager

As a busy director, you can't know every thing your IT manager is working on. But what you do need to know is that some of the basics are in place, so if you ask your IT manager just 5 key questions, make sure they cover cost, security and business continuity. Here are our suggested top 5 questions to ask your IT manager, before leaving the detail to them.

COST

1. Do we have the right internet package for our needs?

Having bought your own broadband package at home, you may think the choice is a fairly straightforward affair. However, business broadband is a much more complex issue, with Service Level Agreements, upload speeds, contention ratios, network support and bandwidth guarantees being just some of the factors that need to be considered.

You need to know that your IT manager has properly assessed exactly how your business operates, and that your internet package fits those needs exactly. If it doesn't, then you risk the frustration of a connection that stifles productivity when you need it most, or a wasteful one that is far in excess of your needs.

For example, a key issue here is that businesses have peaks and troughs in their internet usage. While browsing the internet uses relatively little bandwidth, downloading a large file takes up a lot more (if only for a short period of time). If your connection is not fast enough, this short-term peak will slow everyone else's connection. To avoid these bottlenecks, most businesses should choose their connection speed based on how much bandwidth they need at *peak times*. However, if you want to make a saving and can tolerate bottlenecks when they occur, then reducing your connection speed is a viable option. You just need to be sure that these dips in performance will not affect your businesses' ability to function.

2. How can the web save us money?

Taking business applications online or 'into the cloud' offers a relatively quick and easy way to keep abreast of the latest applications as well as save money, by decreasing overheads such as software license fees and running costs such as upgrades. Moving an operation online, however, requires a re-assessment of security, backup and bandwidth.

A recent survey of IT managers in SMEs found that although one in five were planning to adopt cloud computing, only one in ten had a formal strategy for doing so¹.

¹ Online survey of 255 IT Managers from companies with 10-250 employees carried out by Opinion Matters / Tickbox on behalf of Easynet Connect. (<http://www.easynetconnect.net/Industry-Insight/Whitepapers-and-Reports.aspx>)

To get the cost benefits of cloud computing without taking too much risk, discuss with your IT manager what your most crucial business applications are, and whether you can safely switch any to cloud services. Remember that if you do switch, you may need to readjust your internet package. You will also need to consider how sensitive your data is, and how to host it online.

SECURITY

3. Where is our data and how secure is it?

Your data is the core of your business, so its location is very important. Some people like their data to be physically as close as possible, and will therefore want their servers to be kept in-house. Alternatively, some may prefer to hand the responsibility over to hosting services, which will house the servers in purpose-built data centres. They offer the benefit of 24hr security, and the numerous cost savings associated with economies of scale. Another essential protection measure they can offer is waterless fire protection. Make sure your IT manager has contingency plans to protect against data loss, equipment damage, and security breaches.

BUSINESS CONTINUITY

4. If our internet connection went down, how long would it take to be restored?

This is a crucial question for any business. You need to know to what extent your business depends on having internet connectivity, and make sure you have a suitable level of back up. Research carried out in 2008 suggested that 71% of small businesses could not manage for more than a day without the internet² – a number which no doubt rises every year. If you are one of those companies, then you need to make sure that you can get back online with as little delay as possible.

5. How can we protect our internet connection against outages?

You could take the option to have a second internet connection as a back-up line which will come into action in the event of your first line failing, and some businesses also have a second, back up router in place.

In addition to this, many EtherStream or SureStream products will already run over a number of bundled lines which often means that if one line fails, your connection can still run over the remaining lines. This is a real advantage over similar leased-line or Fibre cables which rely on a single line.

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