

Is Your IT Provider Letting You Down?

The London SME Guide to Choosing the Right IT Partner

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Introduction

Choosing an IT support partner is one of the most important decisions a small or Medium sized business will make. Get it right and you have a trusted partner that keeps your business running, protects your data, and helps you grow. Get it wrong and you're stuck in a contract with a provider that's slow to respond, hard to reach, and more interested in renewing your licence than understanding your business.

The problem is that most IT companies look the same on the surface. They all promise fast response times, proactive support, and a dedicated account manager. So how do you separate the ones that genuinely deliver from the ones that simply talk a good game?

This guide gives you the inside track. Whether you're reviewing your current IT provider, coming out of a bad contract, or looking for managed IT support for the first time, these are the seven things every London-based business should look for, and the red flags to watch out for along the way.

1. Response Times That Are Actually Guaranteed

When something goes wrong with your IT, every minute counts. A server outage, a cyber attack, or even a staff member locked out of their account can bring productivity to a standstill. That's why response times aren't just a nice-to-have, they're a commercial necessity.

What to look for: A reputable IT provider will offer a clearly defined Service Level Agreement (SLA) that guarantees specific response times based on the severity of the issue. Look for tiered response commitments, for example, a critical system outage should be responded to within 15–30 minutes, while a lower priority request might be 4–8 hours.

What to ask:

- What are your guaranteed response times for critical, high, and standard issues?

- Are those response times measured from when I log the ticket, or from when an engineer picks it up?
- Can I see how you are currently performing against your SLAs?

Red flag: Vague promises like "we aim to respond as quickly as possible" with no contractual commitment are a warning sign. If it's not in writing, it isn't guaranteed.

2. Proactive Support, Not Just Reactive Fix-Its

There are two types of IT support companies. The first only appears when something breaks. The second works continuously in the background to make sure things don't break in the first place. The difference to your business is enormous.

Reactive support means downtime, lost productivity, and firefighting. Proactive support means issues are identified and resolved before your team even notices them.

What to look for: A managed service provider (MSP) worth their contract will offer 24/7 monitoring of your systems, regular maintenance windows, patch management, and scheduled reviews of your IT environment. Ask how they identify problems before they escalate.

What to ask:

- How do you monitor our systems and how often?
- What does your patch management process look like, including applications, not just operating systems?
- Can you give me an example of an issue you caught and resolved before it impacted a client?

Red flag: If most of their client conversations start with "we've had a problem" rather than "we noticed something and fixed it," you're dealing with a reactive provider. That's an expensive way to run your IT.

3. A Team That Understands Your Industry

IT support isn't one-size-fits-all. A law firm in the City has very different compliance requirements to a recruitment agency in Mayfair. A financial services business has different security obligations to a manufacturing company in outer London. Your IT provider should understand the nuances of your industry, not just your technology.

What to look for: Look for a provider with demonstrable experience in your sector. They should understand the software you rely on, the regulatory environment you operate in, and the specific risks your industry faces. Case studies, client references, and sector-specific certifications are all good indicators.

What to ask:

- Do you have experience supporting businesses in our sector?
- Are you familiar with the compliance requirements relevant to our industry?
- Can you provide references from clients in a similar field?

Red flag: A provider that claims to support every industry equally well but can't speak knowledgeably about your specific software, compliance requirements, or sector challenges is generalising. Generic IT support leads to generic outcomes.

4. Cyber Security That's Built In, Not Bolted On

Cyber threats are the single biggest technology risk facing SMEs today. Ransomware, phishing attacks, business email compromise, and data breaches are no longer the preserve of large enterprises, small and medium businesses are increasingly the primary target, precisely because attackers know their defences are often weaker.

Your IT provider should treat cyber security as a fundamental part of everything they do, not an optional add-on sold at extra cost.

What to look for: At a minimum, your provider should be offering multi-factor authentication (MFA), managed detection and response (MDR), email filtering, regular security patching, staff awareness training, and a clear incident response process. Certifications such as Cyber Essentials Plus are a strong indicator of a provider that takes security seriously.

What to ask:

- How is cyber security integrated into your standard service, and what costs extra?
- Are you Cyber Essentials Plus certified? The “Plus” is important as it shows that the IT provider is externally assessed to meet this requirement, don't settle for the lower certification.
- What is your incident response process if we suffer a breach?
- When did you last conduct a security review for a client similar to us?

Red flag: Any provider that treats cyber security as a separate conversation to be had later, or that bundles it into a premium tier without including the basics as standard, is not approaching security with the seriousness it deserves.

5. Transparent, Predictable Pricing

One of the most common complaints SMEs have about their IT providers is unexpected costs. An invoice arrives with charges for work that felt like it should have been included, or a renewal comes in significantly higher than the previous year with little explanation.

Good IT support should feel financially predictable. You should know what you're paying, what it covers, and where the boundaries are.

What to look for: A clear, fixed monthly fee that covers a defined scope of services. Any additional costs, for project work, out-of-hours or onsite support, or hardware procurement should be clearly communicated in advance. Ask for a full breakdown of what is and isn't included before you sign.

What to ask:

- Is your pricing per user, per device, or per site?
- What is explicitly excluded from the monthly fee?
- How do you handle pricing for project work or one-off requests?
- How have your prices changed for existing clients over the last three years?

Red flag: Providers that are reluctant to give you a clear written breakdown of inclusions and exclusions, or that use complicated pricing structures that are hard to interrogate, often rely on those grey areas to generate additional revenue. Transparency upfront is a strong indicator of how a provider will behave throughout the relationship.

6. Scalability as Your Business Grows

Your IT needs today won't be your IT needs in two years. SMEs grow, hire, open new offices, acquire businesses, and shift to new ways of working. Your IT provider needs to be capable of scaling with you, not becoming a bottleneck when you need to move quickly.

What to look for: A provider that has experience supporting businesses at different stages of growth, with a clear process for onboarding new users, adding locations, and introducing new technologies. Cloud expertise — particularly around Microsoft 365, Azure, and hybrid working infrastructure — is increasingly important for businesses that need flexibility.

What to ask:

- How do you handle onboarding when we hire new staff quickly?
- Have you supported businesses through periods of rapid growth or acquisition?
- How do you approach cloud migration and hybrid working infrastructure?
- What does your offboarding process look like if we ever need to move providers?

Red flag: A provider that struggles to give clear answers about scalability, or that has a rigid service structure with limited flexibility, may serve your needs today but create friction as your business evolves. Also pay close attention to the offboarding question — a provider confident in their service will have a clear, fair exit process. One that hedges or deflects on this question may be harder to leave than you'd like.

7. A Genuine Business Partnership, Not Just a Service Desk

The best IT providers don't just fix problems. They understand your business objectives, challenge you to use technology more effectively, and bring ideas to the table that help you operate better, compete harder, and grow faster. This is the difference between a transactional helpdesk relationship and a genuine technology partnership.

What to look for: Regular service reviews, a named account manager with genuine knowledge of your business, a technology roadmap that aligns your IT investment with your commercial goals, and a provider that proactively brings recommendations rather than waiting to be asked.

What to ask:

- How often will we have formal service reviews?
- Who is our named point of contact and how accessible are they?
- Can you show me an example of a technology roadmap you've built for a similar client?
- How do you stay up to date with new technologies and communicate relevant developments to your clients?

Red flag: If the relationship after signing looks identical to the sales process — lots of attention at the start, then radio silence until renewal, you have a vendor, not a partner. The best IT providers are ones you hear from regularly with useful, proactive communication, not just when something goes wrong or a contract is due.

Conclusion: What Good IT Support Looks Like

A great IT partner is one you rarely have to think about, because everything just works. But behind that seamless experience is a team that's monitoring your systems, patching vulnerabilities, planning your technology roadmap, and standing ready to respond the moment something needs attention.

Use the seven criteria in this guide to evaluate any IT provider you're considering. Ask the questions, push for specific answers, and pay close attention to how they handle the ones they find uncomfortable. The way a provider responds to scrutiny before you sign tells you a great deal about how they'll behave once you do.

About Urban Network

Urban Network are a London-based managed service provider with over 23 years of experience supporting SMEs across the capital. We provide proactive IT support, cyber security, cloud services, and strategic technology consultancy to businesses across a wide range of sectors.

If you'd like to find out how we can help your business, **book a free consultation with our team today.** No jargon, no hard sell, just straight answers from people who know London business inside out.

Call us on 0333 188 5155 or visit urbannetwork.co.uk