



Top Ten things to look for in a Managed Service

Using managed services allows your own people to focus on core and strategic projects. But you need to trust a third party organisation with a service you could have delivered internally. This means you should expect at least as much commitment from your service provider as you would have got from your own team of experts. Before you take the plunge here are ten things to look out for:

1. Expect pro-active management

The crux of any managed service is the level of proactive support offered by the service provider. Some managed services are little more than maintenance contracts.

Ask how many times the service provider detects a fault before their customers report it to them. It should be the majority of the time.

Proactive management doesn't stop at fault detection. It also extends to ongoing fault management. If your own department was resolving an issue you'd expect to be kept in the loop. Ask them about the ratio of incoming calls to incidents detected. If it's close to 1:1 that means they are proactively keeping their customers informed of progress and not waiting to be chased by them.

Good service providers will be highlighting issues to you and preventing them from reoccurring

2. Demand transparency

If you had your own team running the service you'd know exactly what they were doing for you. You should expect the same sort of access to your service provider's systems. Make sure they provide a secure web-based interface so you can have visibility into the work they're doing on your behalf.

3. Look for intelligence, not just data

At the very least you should expect a comprehensive set of report about the aspects of the service that are important to you. But in itself this information is little more than a data-dump. A managed service provider should be interpreting this data for you and making short and long term recommendations in just the same way your own department would do.

4. A Helpdesk not a Call-Centre

At some point your skilled operations staff will be calling in to talk to your service provider about resolving an issue. Find a provider that staffs its operations centre with expert engineers that know what they're talking about. There will be nothing more frustrating for your people than to work through a call-handling intermediary that can't understand their problem. They need to talk to someone who understands their problem even better than they do.

IT faults can be complex. When you have placed your trust in third parties you can't afford to have them blame each other. Find out what their approach is when they have proved a fault is not their responsibility, but it is still not resolved for you. The best organisations will continue to work with you and your partners even after they have satisfied you that the incident isn't within their remit.

5. In-house skills

No organisation can cost-effectively do everything themselves. But make sure the core elements of the service you are outsourcing are delivered by the service provider using internal resources. Otherwise, no matter how strict your SLA's, you'll find yourself on the end of a long-chain of management operations with no-one able to take overall responsibility.

At the very least you should insist that the design, project management and day-to-day management is carried out by in-house staff.

6. 24x7 is when you need it

Managed service providers should have the scale to deliver their services around the clock. Make sure they have a fully backed-up 24x7 operation. But just as importantly make sure they can fit around your working hours. If some of your locations are inaccessible outside working hours, for example, make sure they'll agree to a response schedule that factors this in.

7. Customised for you

If it was your own service you'd be able to do exactly what you want with it. Make sure your service provider doesn't plan to tie you down to a strictly defined service description. Or if they are willing to deviate from their standard service description make sure they don't expect to charge hidden change control costs.

8. SLA's

Nobody wants to buy a service that doesn't meet its SLA's (Service Level Agreements). But do build realistic end-user expectations, then chose a service provider who will match this with an achievable SLA.

Service Credits for SLA failure are normally modest, so don't give your service provider the chance to "buy themselves out" from remaining true to their contracted commitment. Expect a true partnership where you provider goes the 'extra mile' regardless of whether penalty payments are about to be invoked.

9. Flexibility of payment terms

Managing a service should also mean managing the payment terms. Watch out for service providers who want to charge large set-up fees up front. They should be funding the cost of capital, not you.

But do expect to make a long-term commitment. A provider offering you a twelve month contract won't be investing in your organisation, they'll just be providing an off-the-shelf package.

10. People

Buying a managed service is like recruiting some more members into your team.

Make sure the people you meet during the sales process will be the people who will be running your service. If possible, visit the team who will be providing back-office technical support. At the design stage, make sure the technical team are concerned with the lifetime costs and performance of the service, not just designing the cheapest day-one solution. These people are your new team. You need to be able to trust them.

Finally, to add real value, you should expect that your service provider should understand more than just your technology. They should also understand your organisation and what it needs to achieve. Look for providers that have a track record of delivering for similar organisations so they can match their responses to your priorities.