

I.T.

Buyers Guide

ASCENTDATASM
IT Services • Cloud • Data Center

***The Business Owner's
Buyer's Guide to I.T. Support And Services***

What You Should Expect To Pay For I.T. Support For Your Business

(And How To Get *Exactly* What You Need
Without Unnecessary Extras, Unexpected Fees
And "Gotcha" Contracts)

Read this guide and you'll discover:

- ✓ The two most common ways I.T. services companies charge for their services, and the pros and cons of each approach.
- ✓ Why the Cloud has become an important part of the IT solution mix and how to evaluate its usefulness to you.
- ✓ Common billing models that put YOU AT RISK, why, how to avoid them.
- ✓ Exclusions, hidden fees and other "gotcha" clauses I.T. companies put in their contracts that you DON'T want to agree to.
- ✓ How to make sure you know exactly what you're getting to avoid disappointment, frustration and added costs later on that you didn't anticipate.
- ✓ 21 revealing questions to ask your I.T. support firm BEFORE giving them access to your computer network, e-mail and data.

From the Desk of Dean Genge
CEO
Ascent Data

If you are the Owner or senior executive of a business in Southwestern Pennsylvania that is currently searching for options for I.T. support, or switching from your current provider, this report contains important information that will be extremely valuable to you as you search for a competent firm you can **trust**.

I'm Dean Genge, CEO of Ascent Data. We've been providing I.T. services to businesses in the Southwestern Pennsylvania area for over twenty years. You may not have heard of us before, but I'm sure you're familiar with one or more of the other companies that are clients of ours. A few of their comments are enclosed.

One of the most common questions we get from prospective clients calling our office is "What do you charge for your services?" Since this is such a common question – and a very important one to address – our President, George Jabra, and I decided to write this report for three reasons:

1.

We wanted an easy way to answer this question and educate all prospective clients who come to us on the most common ways I.T. services companies package and price their services, the pros and cons of each approach, and the emergence of the Cloud as an economical and secure element in the Municipal IT solution set.

2.

We wanted to bring to light a few "industry secrets" about I.T. services contracts and SLAs (service level agreements) that almost no one thinks about, understands or knows to ask about when evaluating I.T. services providers that can end up burning you with hidden fees and locking you into a long-term contract when they are unwilling or unable to deliver the quality of service you need.

3.

We wanted to educate executives on how to pick the **right** I.T. services company for their specific situation, budget and needs based on the **VALUE** the company can deliver, not just the price, high OR low.

In the end, our purpose is to help you make the most informed decision possible, so you end up working with someone who helps you solve your problems and accomplish what you want in a time frame, manner and budget that is right for you.

Dedicated to serving you,

Dean and George

About The Authors



Dean Genge is CEO of Ascent Data. He was appointed to the Board of Directors at the company's founding in 1997. Dean oversees strategy, mergers and acquisitions, marketing, and overall company performance. Dean was named President in 2013 and became CEO in 2020. He has extensive management experience in technology services, software, telecom, and private aviation.



George Jabra joined Ascent Data in 2008 and was named President in 2020. George is responsible for managing operations, information security, service delivery, customer success, and partner programs. He has extensive network, systems, cloud, data center, and business management experience. George holds a 2004 Master's Degree in Information Technology from Université de Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada, and numerous industry certifications.

The Ascent Data staff are all CJIS Certified and have been fingerprinted and had a background check by the PA State Police. We've been an I.T. Professional Services company since our founding in 1997, Ascent Data began providing remote managed services in 2000. In 2001 Ascent Data built its SOC2 audited commercial data center, and in 2008 began hosting private cloud services in the data center. Ascent Data is based in Pittsburgh. We serve clients everywhere.



Comparing Apples To Apples: The Predominant I.T. Service Models Explained

Before you can accurately compare the fees, services and deliverables of one I.T. services company with another, you need to understand their service models and fee structures, and factor in significant recent market changes that impact the service options and capabilities you'll want your next provider to offer.

- **Time and Materials.** In the industry, we call this “break-fix” services. Essentially you pay an agreed-upon hourly rate for a technician to “fix” your problem when something “breaks.” Under this model, you might be able to negotiate a discount based on buying a block of hours. The scope of work may be simply to resolve a specific problem, like fixing a problem with your e-mail, or it may encompass a large project, like a network upgrade or move that has a specific result and end date clarified. Some companies will offer staff augmentation and placement under this model as well.



- **Managed I.T. Services.** This is a model where the I.T. services company takes the role of your fully outsourced “I.T. department” and not only installs and supports all the devices and PCs that connect to your server(s), but also offers phone and on-site support, antivirus, cyber security, backup and a host of other services to monitor and maintain the health, speed, performance and security of your computer network.



When you outsource I.T. support, you need to understand the pros and cons, including fee models, of both “managed I.T. services” and “break-fix”. In addition, new technologies, hardware costs, security concerns, work-from-home options, natural disasters, and corporate finance strategies have made traditional IT infrastructure and management practices obsolete. Let’s explore what this means to you.

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Why The Cloud Has Become An Important Element In the IT Solutions Mix

Before you can accurately compare the fees, services and deliverables of one I.T. services company with another, you need to understand their service models and fee structures, and factor in significant recent market changes that impact the service options and capabilities you'll want your next provider to offer.

- **Cloud Services.** Virtually all software companies have moved their applications into the cloud and changed their pricing to a subscription model. Rather than hosting the application on your own server or at a third-party provider, your users simply use the app hosted on the software vendor's servers. Some offer an additional support subscription. Most expect you to have your own IT team provide support. Examples include Microsoft 365, Gmail, QuickBooks Online, Salesforce CRM, and most other enterprise application vendors.



Cloud Hosting. Different from cloud services, cloud hosting is when you contract with a third party to provide the infrastructure and computing power for your own network and applications.

In a **Public Cloud**, you rent computing resources on shared servers and provision and manage the resources with your own team. Amazon Web Services and Microsoft Azure are the two leading providers. In a **Private Cloud** you rent dedicated servers for your exclusive use. Some providers require you to provision and manage the environment and some manage the service for you. The Private Cloud market is more service intensive with more local providers.

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Managed I.T. Services Vs. Break-Fix: Which Is The Better, More Cost-Effective Option?

You've probably heard the famous Benjamin Franklin quote, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." We couldn't agree more – and that's why it's our sincere belief that some form of managed I.T. is essential for every organization. In our company, we offer different plans to fit the needs of our clients. In some cases, where the business is small, we might offer a very basic managed services plan to ensure the most essential maintenance is done, then bill the client hourly for any support used. Our smallest clients often find this the most economical. We offer a fully managed approach for some of our mid-sized organizations, where more comprehensive I.T. services are covered in a managed plan. By doing this, we can properly staff for their accounts and ensure they get the fast, responsive support and expertise they need.



The only time we would recommend a "time and materials" approach is when you already have a competent I.T. person or team proactively managing your computer network and simply have a specific I.T. project to complete that your current in-house I.T. team doesn't have the time nor expertise to implement (such as migrating to a cloud-based solution, implementing a cyber security plan, etc.). Outside of that specific scenario, we do not think the break-fix approach is a good idea for general I.T. support for one very important, fundamental reason: you'll ultimately end up paying for a pound of "cure" for problems that could have easily been avoided with an "ounce" of prevention.

Why Regular Monitoring And Maintenance Is Critical For Today's Computer Networks

The fact of the matter is computer networks absolutely, positively need ongoing maintenance and monitoring to stay secure. The ever-increasing dependency we have on I.T. systems and the data they hold – not to mention the *type* of data we're now saving digitally – has given rise to very smart and sophisticated cybercrime organizations that work around the clock to do one thing: hack into your network to steal data or money or to hold you ransom.

As you may know, ransomware is at an all-time high because hackers make millions of tax-free dollars robbing one small business owner at a time. But that's not their only incentive.



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Hackers: Some will attempt to hack your network to gain access to bank accounts, credit cards or passwords to rob you (and your clients). Some use your computer network to send spam using YOUR domain and servers, host pirated software and, of course, spread viruses.

Organized Crime: These cybercriminals are highly organized and well-run operations with *teams* of hackers. They use software that scans millions of networks for vulnerabilities and use readily available data on the dark web of YOUR usernames, passwords, e-mail addresses and other data to gain access.

But That's Not All: Rogue employees, lost devices, hardware failures (still a BIG reason for data loss), fire and natural disasters and a host of other issues can interrupt or outright destroy your I.T. infrastructure and the data it holds. Then there's regulatory compliance for any organization hosting or touching personally identifiable information and CJIS compliance for the Police Department.

Prevention is Key: Preventing these problems and keeping your systems up and running (which is what managed I.T. services is all about) is a LOT less expensive and damaging to your organization than waiting paying for emergency I.T. services to restore your systems to working order (break-fix).

Should You Just Hire A Full-Time I.T. Manager?

In most cases, it is not cost-effective for organizations with under several hundred employees to hire a full-time I.T. person for a couple of reasons.

No one I.T. person can know everything there is to know about I.T. support and cyber security. If your business is big enough and growing fast enough to support a full-time I.T. lead, you probably need more than one person. You need someone with help-desk expertise as well as a network engineer, a network administrator, a CIO (chief information officer) and a CISO (chief information security officer). Very expensive.



Duct tape and bailing wire: Not able to hire highly paid I.T. management, companies often hire a mid-level IT manager placed at a supreme disadvantage with no support. Day-to-day user demands and technology failures leave zero time to step back and thoroughly assess the systemic risk present in the infrastructure. The result – no plan and zero budget. They're expected to keep things running and never have enough money. Leadership never receives informed, honest advice about how to best manage their technology efficiently and securely. Decisions are made blindly. You still need outside IT support, but they get brought in with very specific instructions to fix an urgent problem on a very tight budget.

Second, finding and hiring skilled I.T. people is incredibly difficult due to the skill shortage for I.T. And if you're not technical, it's going to be very difficult for you to interview candidates and sift and sort through all the duds out there to find someone with good skills and experience. Because you're not technical, you might not know the right questions to ask during the interview process or the skills they need to do the job.

The hard and soft costs of building an internal I.T. department for general I.T. support just don't provide the best return on investment for the average small to midsize business. An internal I.T. department typically doesn't make sense until you have a few hundred employees OR you have unique circumstances and need specialized skills, a developer, etc., but not for day-to-day I.T. support and maintenance.

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More often than not, the hard and soft costs of building an internal I.T. department just don't provide the best return on investment for the average small to midsize business. An internal I.T. department typically doesn't make sense until you have a few hundred employees OR you have unique circumstances and need specialized skills, a developer, etc., but not for day-to-day I.T. support and maintenance.

Why "Break-Fix" Works Entirely In The Consultant's Favor, Not Yours

Under a "break-fix" model, there is a fundamental conflict of interest between you and your I.T. firm. The I.T. services company has no incentive to prevent problems, stabilize your network or resolve problems quickly because they are getting paid by the hour when things stop working; therefore, the risk of unforeseen circumstances, scope creep, learning curve inefficiencies and outright incompetence are all shifted to YOU, the customer. Essentially, the more problems you have, the more they profit, which is precisely what you DON'T want.



Under this model, the I.T. consultant can take the liberty of assigning a junior (lower-paid) technician to work on your problem – one who may take two to three times as long to resolve an issue that a more senior (and more expensive) technician might resolve in a fraction of the time. There is no incentive to properly manage the time of that technician or their efficiency, and there is every reason for them to prolong the project and find MORE problems than solutions. Of course, if they're ethical and want to keep you as a client, they *should* be doing everything possible to resolve your problems quickly and efficiently; however, that's akin to putting a German shepherd in charge of watching over the ham sandwiches. Not a good idea.

Second, it creates a management problem for you, the customer, who now has to keep track of the hours they've worked to make sure you aren't getting overbilled, and since you often have no way of really knowing if they've worked the hours they say they have, it creates a situation where you really, truly need to be able to trust they are being 100% ethical and honest AND tracking their hours properly (not all do).

This all makes budgeting for I.T. projects and expenses a nightmare since they may be zero one month and thousands the next.

Pricing Aside, Here's Why "Break-Fix" Fails As An IT Management Model

Sixty percent of businesses that have been breached don't survive. The Break-Fix model is, by definition, reactive. Something bad happens and you react. YOU HAVE ZERO VISIBILITY INTO THE IT-DRIVEN RISK THAT IS ALREADY EMBEDDED IN YOUR NETWORK AND SYSTEMS AND YOU ARE NOT PAYING ANYONE TO FIGURE IT OUT. So, you are blind and vulnerable. The only way to be proactive about risk and prevent a catastrophic breach is to pay an experienced MSP to provide you with a comprehensive risk assessment report and then do something about it.

What Should You Expect To Pay?

Important! Please note that the following price quotes are industry averages based on a recent I.T. industry survey conducted of over 750 different I.T. services firms. We are providing this information to give you a general idea of what most I.T. services firms charge and to help you understand the VAST DIFFERENCES in service contracts that you must be aware of before signing on the dotted line. Please understand that this does NOT reflect our pricing model or approach, which is simply to understand exactly what you want to accomplish FIRST and then customize a solution based on your specific needs, budget and situation.



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Hourly Break-Fix Fees:

Most I.T. services companies selling break-fix services charge \$50 to \$400 per hour (depending on the work and level of expertise required) with a one-hour minimum. In most cases, they will give you a discount of 5% to as much as 20% on their hourly rates if you purchase and pay for a block of hours in advance.

If they are quoting a **project**, the fees range widely based on the scope of work. If you're hiring an I.T. consulting firm, demand the following:

- **A very detailed scope of work that specifies what "success" is.** Make sure you detail what your expectations are in performance, workflow, costs, security, access, etc. The more detailed you can be, the better. Detailing your expectations up front will go a long way toward avoiding miscommunications and additional fees later on to give you what you REALLY wanted.
- **A fixed budget and time frame for completion.** Agreeing to this up front aligns both your agenda and the consultant's. Be very wary of loose estimates that allow the consulting firm to bill you for "unforeseen" circumstances. The bottom line is this: it is your I.T. consulting firm's responsibility to be able to accurately assess your situation and quote a project based on their experience. You should not have to pick up the tab for a consultant underestimating a job or for their inefficiencies. A true professional knows how to take into consideration those contingencies and bill accordingly.



Warning! Beware the gray areas of "all-inclusive" service contracts. In order to truly compare the "cost" of one managed I.T. services contract with another, you need to make sure you fully understand what IS and ISN'T included AND the SLA (service level agreement) you are signing up for. It's VERY easy for one I.T. services provider to appear less expensive than another UNTIL you look closely at what you're getting.

Managed I.T. Services:

Most managed I.T. services firms will quote you a MONTHLY fee based on the number of devices they need to maintain, back up and support. In Pittsburgh that fee is somewhere in the range of \$95 to \$130 per server, about the same range per desktop and approximately \$15 to \$35 per smartphone or mobile device.

If you hire an I.T. consultant and sign up for a managed I.T. services contract, here are some things that **SHOULD** be included (make sure you read your contract to validate this):

- Hardware & Software Audits
- Monitor all server services and logs.
- Ticket Escalation with Steps to Resolution
- Keep service packs, patches, and hotfixes current as per company policy.
- Antivirus Management
- Remote Restart of Services by NOC
- Patch Deployment by NOC
- NOC Resolution of Patch Failures
- Full Remote Problem Resolution by NOC
- Proactive or On-Demand Server Restart
- Monitor Active Directory and AD Group Policy Troubleshooting
- Monitor disk health and Remote assistance for disk remediation.
- System Performance Analysis & Troubleshooting
- Scheduled server maintenance.
- Set up and maintain groups (accounting, admin printers, sales, warehouse, etc.)
- Mitigate user errors (deleted files, corrupted files, etc.)

The following services are usually **NOT included** and will often be billed separately. Make sure you review your contract carefully to know what is and is NOT included!

- Hardware (ex. new servers), PCs, laptops, etc.
- Software licenses
- Security solutions
- Backup and Recovery
- Special projects
- Anything that is not listed as covered in the base price, which can include lots of things

Why You Need To Consider A Private Cloud Hosting Solution For Your Business



Everything about managing, maintaining, supporting, improving and affording technology has changed dramatically in the last five years.

Businesses have two main software deployment options: on-premise software and cloud computing. Cloud computing has been gaining favor for ten years, and cloud services grew 18.4 percent in 2021 to a total of \$304.9 billion, up from \$257.5 billion, according to the technology market research company Gartner Group.

But most small businesses are being left behind because most cloud computing services are provided via on-demand and self-service. Most companies don't have the cloud computing expertise to manage their own cloud and costs can get out of control due to the predatory pricing structures of the big public cloud providers.

Managed correctly, cloud computing makes data backup, business continuity and disaster recovery easier and more affordable as data can be backed up at several sites within the network of the cloud provider. Here are some of the top pros and cons of cloud computing:

Pros:

- Onsite hardware and capital expenses are eliminated, allowing agencies to grow rapidly without outgrowing their infrastructure.
- Can be easily scaled up as needed with solutions that are on-demand, meaning agencies only pay for the options they want.
- Users can connect from any location using a smartphone, tablet or computers.
- Agencies can implement bring your own device (BYOD) policies.
- Data loss is unlikely as data can be backed up in the cloud as often as every 15 minutes.

Cons:

- Users are limited based on the speed of the internet connection.
- Agencies can lose access to their data when the internet goes down.
- Third-party cloud service providers have direct access to your data.
- For certain organizations that are not as dependent on uptime, the cost of cloud computing can sometimes outweigh the advantages.

!!! Your IT services provider must have extensive cloud management experience and a cloud hosting environment that they own and control. !!!

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The following are 21 questions to ask your I.T. services provider that will clarify exactly what you're getting for the money. Some of these items may not be that important to you, while others (like response time, adequate insurance and uptime guarantees) may be critical. Make sure you understand each of these items before deciding who the right provider is for you, then make sure you get this IN WRITING.

21 Questions You Should Ask Your I.T. Services Company Or Consultant Before Hiring Them For I.T. Support

Customer Service:

Q1 When I have an I.T. problem, how do I get support?

Our Answer: When a client has a problem, we "open a ticket" in our I.T. management system so we can properly assign, track, prioritize, document and resolve client issues. However, some I.T. firms force you to send an email or log in to their portal to submit a ticket. How frustrating for your users! They won't allow you to call in or initiate a chat session to get immediate support from a live person. This is for THEIR convenience, not yours. Trust us, this will become a giant inconvenience and thorn in your side. While an email or portal is a good option for less time-sensitive requests (onboarding a new user, for instance) it should never be your ONLY option for requesting support.

Also, make sure they HAVE a reliable system in place to keep track of client "tickets" and requests. If they don't, we can practically guarantee your requests will sometimes get overlooked, skipped and forgotten.

Requesting support should also be EASY for you. So be sure to ask how you can submit a problem to their support desk for resolution. We make it easy. Calling and chatting are the most effective channels for your team to get their issue addressed right away.

Q2 Do you offer after-hours support, and if so, what is the guaranteed response time?

Our Answer: Any good I.T. company will answer their phones LIVE (not voice mail or phone trees) and respond from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every weekday. But many businesses work outside normal "9 to 5" hours and need I.T. support both nights and weekends. We offer 24/7 support and GUARANTEE the same response time as during normal hours. Different issues require different resolution times, so we have a Service Level Agreement (SLA) that clearly identify issue types and target resolution times.

Any provider you consider must be able to document response and resolution times across their customer base. If not, you'll just have to "trust" them.



Q3

Do you have a written, guaranteed response time for working on resolving your problems?

Our Answer: We bring this up again because it is the single biggest complaint among everyone who comes to us wanting to change IT providers. Most I.T. firms offer a 60-minute or 30-minute response time to your call during normal business hours. Be very wary of someone who doesn't have a guaranteed response time IN WRITING – that's a sign they are too disorganized, understaffed or overwhelmed to handle your request. Our written, guaranteed response time is thirty-minutes or less. Our documented response times are less than one minute for chat and telephone requests. We limit email requests to longer lead time support items like new employee onboarding and equipment purchases.

**Q4**

Will I be given a dedicated account manager?

Our Answer: Smaller firms may not offer this due to staff limitations, and the owner may tell you they will personally manage your account. While that *sounds* like great customer service, the owner is usually so busy that you'll only be given reactive support instead of proactive account management. (Plus, his dog is miserable because he only gets short walks and never gets to play fetch.) Our account managers proactively reach out to their clients every week and know you, your business and your goals.

Q5

Do you have a feedback system in place for your clients to provide "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" ratings on your service? If so, can I see those reports?

Our Answer: If they don't have this type of feedback system, they may be hiding poor customer service results. Or, they really have no idea how much their clients are suffering. We're not sure which is worse. If they DO have one, ask to see the actual scores and reporting. That will tell you a lot about the quality of service they are providing. We are very proud of our positive client feedback scores and will be happy to show them to you.



I.T. Maintenance (Managed Services): _____

Q6

Do you offer true managed I.T. services and support?

Our Answer: You want to find an I.T. company that will proactively monitor for problems and perform routine maintenance on your I.T. systems. If they don't have the ability to do this, or they don't offer it, we strongly recommend you look somewhere else. Our remote network monitoring system watches over your network to constantly look for developing problems, security issues and other problems so we can address them BEFORE they turn into bigger problems.

Q7

What is **NOT** included in your managed services agreement?

Our Answer: Another “gotcha”. There is no consistent list of services included and excluded among the different I.T. service providers. Most providers imply they include everything AND have a low price. Great sales tactic. Bad for long term relationships.

Since they’re all different, you should ask for their “included” and “excluded” lists. Armed with those for each competing vendor you are far more likely to be able to make an apples-to-apples comparison. It will provoke great questions on your part. And you’ll come away with a much better sense of the integrity, capability, and value of the different providers.



Q8

Is your help desk local or outsourced?

Our Answer: Be careful, because hiring, retaining, and efficiently managing a highly responsive and effective help desk is one of the biggest challenges IT service providers face and most are terrible at it. All will claim excellence. Prospects don’t complain to us about the pricing of their IT provider. They complain about performance, and the biggest frustration is getting a response from “Support.”

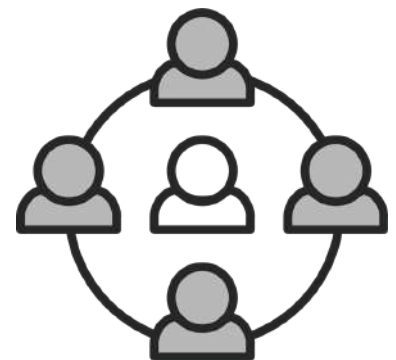
If anyone tells you, “We all answer the phones,” it is code for, “We’re totally out of control.” For Ascent Data, a tightly managed team of in-house and third-party support professionals has proven a winning formula. Our documented response and resolution times are the equal of any in the industry.

Q9

How many engineers do you have on staff?

Our Answer: Technology is far too complex these days for any one person to have all the answers. Our engineering team is constantly collaborating, sharing expertise to create the best solutions, informed by experience, for our clients. They troubleshoot each other’s work. And they back each other up with detailed documentation so anyone can step in to address an issue.

IN FACT: Ask how they document fixes, changes, credentials so if one tech is out or unavailable, another can step in and know your network settings, history, previous issues, etc., and how those issues were resolved. This is important or you’ll be constantly frustrated with techs who are starting over to resolve a known issue. And as may be the same in your organization, unless they are collaborating every one of them thinks they have a better way.



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Q10

Do you offer documentation of our network as part of the plan, and how does that work?

Our Answer: Network documentation is exactly what it sounds like: the practice of maintaining detailed technical records about the assets you own (computers, devices, software, directory structure, user profiles, passwords, etc.) and how your network is set up, backed up and secured. Every I.T. company should provide this to you at no additional cost.

Why is this important? There are several reasons:

First, it shows professionalism and integrity in protecting YOU. No I.T. person or company should be the only holder of the keys to the kingdom. Because we document your network assets and passwords, you have a blueprint you can give to another I.T. person or company to take over if necessary.

Second, good documentation allows the engineers working on your account to resolve problems faster because they don't waste time fumbling their way around your network trying to find things and uncover accounts, hardware, software licenses, etc.

Third, if you had to restore your network after a disaster, you'd have the blueprint to quickly put things back in place as they were.

Side note: You should NEVER allow an I.T. person to have that much control over you and your company. If you get the sneaking suspicion that your current I.T. person is keeping this under their control as a means of job security, get rid of them (and we can help to make sure you don't suffer ANY ill effects). This is downright unethical and dangerous to your organization, so don't tolerate it!

Q11

Do you meet with your clients on a scheduled frequency as part of your agreement?

Our Answer: To us, there's nothing more important than face-to-face time with our clients. Therefore, we make it a priority to meet with all our clients at least twice a year (sometimes more often) to provide a "technology review."

In these meetings, we provide you with the status updates of projects you're working on and of the health and security of your network. We also make recommendations for new equipment and upgrades you will need so you can properly budget for the future. Our meetings with you are C-level discussions where we openly discuss your business risks and goals, including your I.T. budget, critical projects, compliance issues, known problems and cyber security best practices.

Our goal in these meetings is to help you understand and minimize your IT-driven risks, improve operations, lower costs, increase efficiencies and ensure your organizational productivity stays high. This is also your opportunity to give us feedback on how we're doing and discuss upcoming projects.



Q12

If I need or want to cancel my service with you, how does this happen and how do you offboard us?

Our Answer: All contracts are written in anticipation of the divorce. And by the time clients finally decide the pain is unbearable, they can't get out fast enough. Make sure you carefully review the cancellation clause in your agreement. And make sure to give notice within the terms. It can save a lot of pain and acrimony, not to mention lawyers.

We would never "force" a client to stay with us if they are unhappy for any reason. If you're not happy with our service and we can't fix it, you SHOULD leave! Therefore, we make it crystal clear how you can cancel your contract with us, with zero contention or fines.

In addition – and this is absolutely something you should understand before you sign with a provider – how will they support your transition to your next provider? Because we only want happy clients, and because we know the grass is not always greener on the other side and clients do come back, we provide everything you and your new provider need and we're glad to meet with them to answer questions and provide background.

Not every provider does that. Some just go dark.

Cyber Security:

Q13

What cyber security solutions do you offer? What tools do you use?

Our Answer: It's important that your I.T. firm have a broad set of security solutions and tools to protect you from the ever-growing and ever more sophisticated security threats out there. We provide multiple types of security assessments and both proactive and reactive defenses. We constantly evaluate the available security offerings to ensure you are protected by the most up-to-date and best solutions available.

We continuously train our staff and offer security training for your employees.



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Q14

How do you lock down our employees' PCs and devices to ensure they're not compromising our network?

Our Answer: As above, the question may get a bit technical. The key is that they HAVE an answer and don't hesitate to provide it. Some of the things they should mention are:

- 2FA (two-factor authentication)
- Advanced end-point protection, NOT just antivirus
- Next-gen firewall
- XDR deployment and monitoring
- Restrict and monitor administrative access

Because a combination of these lockdown strategies is essential to protecting your network and data, we employ ALL of these for our clients. Effective cyber security should never compromise between choosing this OR that. It should feature every weapon in your arsenal.

Q15

How can they help you qualify for cyber liability insurance?

Our Answer: Regulators, business partners, and customers are all making cyber liability coverage a prerequisite for doing business. Underwriters have caught up with the risks and are charging stratospheric prices and making requirements for coverage ever more stringent. Now the underwriters often won't even provide standard coverages *unless* you have a cyber policy.

In the scramble to qualify for coverage, executives are signing cyber applications without documentation that the answers they're giving are, in fact, truthful.

If your internal team or I.T. vendor does not have a documented process for discovery and can't provide documented proof that every assertion made on that application is correct and fully accurate, run for the hills. Because when the breach happens, and the lawyers and adjusters investigate, you are wide open for claim denial and potential issues with insurance fraud claims. Not to be alarmist, but you may not recover. Many don't. We'll review your cyber policy and show you representations in the policy can't be documented.

One of our clients is a leading insurance broker in Pittsburgh. We've teamed up with them to create a cyber insurance checklist. We assess your I.T. environment against this checklist and show you where you'll fail the application. We help you fix the issues and qualify.

Ask prospective service providers to show you their checklist. If they can't, keep interviewing.



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or call our office at 412-968-4000.

Q16

Who audits YOUR company's cyber security protocols and when was the last time they conducted an audit?

Our Answer: Nobody should proofread their own work, and every professional I.T. consulting firm will have an independent third party reviewing and evaluating their company for airtight cyber security practices.

There are many companies that offer this service, so who they use can vary (there's a number of good ones out there.) If they don't have a professional auditing firm doing this for them on at least an annual basis, or if they tell you they get their peers to audit them, DO NOT hire them. That shows they are not taking cyber security seriously.

You can be confident in the effectiveness of our cyber security because the leading Pittsburgh accounting firm Schneider Downs conducts our annual SOC2 audit, and we will happily share our current report.

Q17

Do you have a SOC and do you run it in-house or outsource it? If outsourced, what company do you use?

Our Answer: A SOC (pronounced "sock"), or security operations center, is a centralized department within a company to monitor and deal with security issues pertaining to a company's network.

What's tricky here is that some I.T. firms manage an in-house SOC and others outsource to specialty providers. Either is fine if they have the right tools, a full suite of solutions, and deep expertise and experience. The sophistication of your adversary is remarkable and more so every day.

Less experienced I.T. consultants may monitor your network hardware, such as servers and workstations, for uptime and patches, but they might not provide security monitoring. This is particularly important if your sensitive data falls under regulatory compliance for data protection.

At Ascent Data, we augment our in-house SOC with specialized solutions outsourced to the best in the security industry, managed on your behalf to provide comprehensive security monitoring to better prevent a network violation or data breach.



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Q18

Can you provide a timeline of how long it will take to get my network back up and running in the event of a disaster?

Our Answer: There are two aspects to backing up your data that most business owners aren't aware of. The first is "fail over" and the other is "fail back." For example, if you get a flat tire, you would fail over by putting on the spare tire to get to a service station where you can fail back to a new or repaired tire.

If you were to have a disaster that wiped out your data and network – be it a ransomware attack or natural disaster – you want to make sure you have a fail-over solution in place so your employees could continue to work with as little interruption as possible. This fail-over should be in the cloud and locked down separately to avoid ransomware from infecting the backups as well as the physical servers and workstations.

But, at some point, you need to fail back to your primary production network, and that's a process that could take days or even weeks. If the backups aren't done correctly, you might not be able to get it back at all. So, one of the key areas you want to discuss with your next I.T. consultant or firm is how they handle both data backup AND disaster recovery. They should have a plan in place and be able to explain the process for the emergency fail-over as well as the process for restoring your network and data with a timeline.

We understand how important your data is and how getting your team up and running quickly is essential to your business success. Therefore, in the event of any disaster, we can confidently get your network back up and running in four hours or less. We run live tests with our clients to document disaster recovery success. We shut down their network (with their approval and participation, of course), restore them to operation in the cloud, and then roll them back to their primary network.

Ask to see other service providers documentation of live disaster recovery exercises.

Q19

Do you INSIST on doing periodic test restores of my backups to make sure the data is not corrupt and could be restored in the event of a disaster?

Our Answer: You know the old saying that if you play a country music song backwards, you'll get your dog back, your house back, and your truck back. Too bad you don't get your data back.

A great I.T. consultant will place eyes on your backup systems every single day to ensure that backups are actually occurring, and without failures. However, in addition to this, your I.T. company should perform a monthly randomized "fire drill" test restore of some of your files from backups to make sure your data CAN be recovered in the event of an emergency. After all, the WORST time to "test" a backup is when you desperately need it.



If you don't feel comfortable asking your current I.T. company to test your backup OR if you have concerns and want to see proof yourself, just conduct this little test: Copy three unimportant files onto a thumb drive (so you don't lose them) and delete them from your server. Make sure one was newly created that same day, one was created a week earlier and the last a month earlier. Then call your I.T. company and let them know you've lost three important documents and need them restored from backups as soon as possible. They should be able to do this easily and quickly. If not, you have a problem that needs to be addressed immediately!

Verifying your backups daily and testing them on a regular basis is a cornerstone of a successful overall I.T. strategy. These are the lengths we go to for all our clients, including multiple random "fire drill" test restores to ensure ALL your files are safe because they are always backed up.

Q20

If I were to experience a location disaster, pandemic shutdown or other disaster that prevented me from being in the office, how would you enable me and my employees to work from a remote location?

Our Answer: If Covid taught us anything, it's that work-interrupting disasters CAN and DO happen when you least expect them. Fires, floods, hurricanes and tornadoes can wipe out an entire building or location. Covid forced everyone into lockdown, and it could happen again.

We could experience a terrorist attack, civil unrest or riots that could shut down entire cities and streets, making it physically impossible to get into a building. Who knows what could be coming down the pike? Hopefully, NONE of this will happen, but sadly it could.

That's why you want to ask your prospective I.T. consultant how quickly they were able to get their clients working remotely (and securely) when Covid shut everything down. Ask to talk to a few of their clients about how the process went.

Here's how we handled our clients' needs when literally overnight everyone needed to work remotely, get laptops and implement security measures. There are two basic parts to the issue, the network and the users.

The bedrock of our service to our customers is to make them aware of the IT-driven risk to their business and show them how to reduce if not eliminate that risk. We didn't predict the pandemic, but we did apprise them of the risk of not being able to access their building. Our customers listen to us and act. The vast majority had prepared their networks, even though none of us knew what for.

The second part of the equation is the users. Different story. While they were *able* to access the network,



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many users didn't know how. Some had bandwidth issues. We got calls. Triple the normal volume of support calls. With 100 clients, that's a lot of calls. Oh, and our staff was working from home as well. The good news is our team performed miracles. They maintained their poise and courteously taught users how to connect, and preemptively distributed documentation with step-by-step instructions.

Sure, there were some issues. Some clients were better prepared than others. But in general, it was a very smooth and successful transition.

Q21

Show me your process and documentation for onboarding me as a new client.

Our Answer: The reason for asking this question is to see if they HAVE SOMETHING in place. A plan, a procedure, a process. Don't take their word for it. Ask to SEE it in writing. What's important here is that they can produce some type of process. Further, they should be able to explain how their process works. The last thing you want in the middle of a transition is surprises.

We have transitioned so many clients from other vendors that we have it down to a simple process and we're very good at making the transition smooth even if the former vendor isn't cooperative. If you consider us as your next I.T. services firm, we will gladly share our new client onboarding process and documentation.

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Other Things To Notice And Look Out For: _____



Are they good at answering your questions in terms you can understand and not in arrogant, confusing “geek-speak”?

Good I.T. companies won't confuse you with techno-mumbo-jumbo, and they certainly shouldn't make you feel stupid for asking questions. All great consultants have the “heart of a teacher” and will take time to answer your questions and explain everything in simple terms. As you interact with them in the evaluation process, watch for this.

Our technicians are trained to take time to answer your questions and explain everything in simple terms. Just look at what one client had to say:



Year after year Ascent Data exceeds my expectations. They do a terrific job supporting our team of users across the country. Over the years the Ascent Data engineers have designed, built, or rebuilt our entire network and server infrastructure keeping us up to date and secure at the same time. I have been able to rely on them for everything from software licensing to process and network documentation. I have never had a better partner in business than in Ascent Data..

– **Josh T / Vice President of Information Technology**



Do they and their technicians present themselves as true professionals when they are in your office? Do they dress professionally and show up on time?

If you'd be embarrassed if YOUR clients saw your I.T. consultant behind your desk, that should be a big red flag. How you do anything is how you do everything, so if they cannot show up on time for appointments, are sloppy with paperwork, show up unprepared, forget your requests and seem disorganized in the meeting, how can you expect them to be 100% on point with your I.T.? You can't. Look for someone else.

Our technicians are true professionals who you would be proud to have in your office. They dress professionally and show up on time, and if they cannot be there on time (for some odd, unforeseen reason), we always notify the client immediately. We believe these are minimum requirements for delivering a professional service.

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Do they have expertise in helping clients like you?

Do they understand how operate the applications you depend on? Have they supported other similar businesses in setting up networks? Do they provide a comprehensive technology risk assessment, help you prioritize within your budget and provide an annual technology roadmap and quarterly budget?

We have many clients across pretty much every vertical. The reason we work well with them is because we understand the tension of urgency, necessity, threat, and budget, and provide options and advice that help them succeed. Here's what one client had to say:



Ascent Data is quick to identify issues AND quick to resolve them. They are reliable. They offer proactive recommendations.

Their cybersecurity solutions, critical for a Family Office like ours, have been working effectively since we partnered with them six years ago, which was not the case with our previous provider.

Ascent Data hosts our infrastructure and network in their private cloud. In fact, we depend on them for everything IT.

And we like the relationship. They make sure we have exposure to their top management on a regular basis and they're accessible anytime we want to discuss ideas.



– Thomas Lavelle, Chief Financial Officer, FFC Capital

A Final Word And Free Offer To Engage With Us

We hope you have found this guide helpful in shedding some light on what to look for when hiring a professional firm to outsource your I.T. support. As we said in the opening of this report, our purpose in providing this information is to help you make an informed decision and avoid the rotating door of providers who don't have the experience or expertise to deliver the support you need.

The next step is simple: call our office at **412-968-4000** and reference this letter to schedule a brief 10- to 15-minute initial consultation.

On this call we can discuss your unique situation and any concerns you have and, of course, answer any questions you have about us. If you feel comfortable moving ahead, we'll schedule a convenient time to conduct our proprietary Technology Risk Assessment and meet with you to report our findings and recommendations.

This Assessment can be conducted 100% remotely with or without your current I.T. company or department knowing (we'll give you the full details on our initial consultation call). **At the end of the Assessment, you'll know:**

- ✓ Where you are overpaying (or getting underserved) for the services and support you are currently getting from your current I.T. company or team.
- ✓ Whether or not your systems and data are *truly* secured from hackers and ransomware, and where you are partially or totally exposed.
- ✓ If your data is *actually* being backed up in a manner that would allow you to recover it quickly in the event of an emergency or ransomware attack.
- ✓ Steps you need to take to reach compliance goals.
- ✓ How you could lower the overall costs of I.T. while improving communication, security and performance, as well as the productivity of your team.

Fresh eyes see things that others cannot – so, at a minimum, our free Assessment is a completely cost- and risk-free way to get a credible third-party validation of the security, stability and efficiency of your I.T. systems.

To Schedule Your **FREE** Assessment, please visit **www.ascentdata.com** or call our office at 412-968-4000.

With appreciation,

Dean Genge and George Jabra
Ascent Data



See What Other Ascent Data Clients Are Saying:

Ascent Data Is Always There To Help You Out



We've been with Ascent Data for eight years. Every year we have a strategic review of our IT and how it impacts our business. This is largely about security, and over the years Ascent Data has helped us build a secure network. We have an account manager who keeps everything on track. He also receives escalations when tickets become urgent to us so we can keep our business moving forward. If you have urgent requests, they are always there to help you out and you can work with them on longer term goals. If you cannot or do not want to afford to hire a full time IT professional for your business, Ascent Data is a reasonably priced alternative to meet your IT needs.

– Keith Goldstrom, Co-CEO, Wojanis Hydrolic Supply

No Need To Worry With Ascent Data!



I was a little skeptical when Ascent Data bought our former IT provider. No need. Ascent's help desk availability is better than any other IT firm we have used in the past, even for employees who work after regular hours. The ticketing and reporting are better, which helps our administration track who is having the issues. Life is better with Ascent Data.

– Susan Golden, Office Manager, GR Smalley

A Full Team Of Experts, Exceptional Documentation, And Account Management Continuity



We used to be supported by a team of one, our guy Justin. Then, he joined Ascent Data, and we came with him. Now Justin is surrounded by experts – a dedicated help desk, network and system engineers, back-up engineers, and security people. They have all the tools and documentation. (We're architects, we like that.) They're all diligent in trying to fix a problem. We've gone from a team of one to Ascent Data's team of 23 and a documented escalation process. And Justin is still on our business. I only had trouble getting a response one time. Pretty good for five years.

– Robert Schafer, Vice President, HHSDR Architects

See What Other Ascent Data Clients Are Saying:

Knowledgeable Staff, More Resources, And Chat Support



The single largest benefit to the Butler City Police Department is having knowledgeable staff at the upper end. Ascent Data has more resources than our former IT provider and they are willing to work with you when needed.

The support chat option is a great feature that every IT company should have. The responses are way quicker than using the help desk. The majority of the tickets are tracked, and you receive email updates. That is kind of nice. To be honest with you, we do not save every ticket number given.

– Sergeant Caleb J. Forsythe, Butler City Police Department

With Ascent Data, We're Self-sufficient, Secure, and Fully Supported



We're a Family Office that needed IT support after we sold our operating company. Ascent Data got us up and running with a new network (set up securely in their cloud, by the way). We all used to have to go through the internal IT person, which was not really a problem for an owner, but could be frustrating for the staff. Now we're set up so everybody can troubleshoot their own issues directly with the Ascent Data team. They know our environment and have turned out to be very competent, helpful, and patient.

– Laura Snavelly, Owner, Snavelly Warwick

A Merger With Benefits



We own an art gallery and have a significant business in corporate art installations. Information Technology isn't our strong suit. When we have a tech issue, Ascent Data comes to the rescue and our stress levels drop immediately. We're so glad our previous tech company merged into Ascent Data. Easy transition. We love the security of knowing professionals are watching out for our interests. You guys do a great job! Thx for your care and attention.

– James Frederick, Owner, James Gallery

See What Other Ascent Data Clients Are Saying:

Ascent Data has made my job easier and less stressful



I asked four different IT companies, over many years, to set up each police officer with their own profile on our server. Ascent Data got this done when they first started, which made our department more efficient and effective.

Just recently we had a new server installed by Ascent Data and it was the smoothest transfer that I have been through, and I have had multiple servers installed over the years. They keep our backup in a secure server on a private cloud in their own data center. As a police department, we rely on their 24/7 help desk, and they have an escalation process to make sure more complex issues get fixed quickly.

I also like having a project manager assigned to our department. I know exactly who to call when we have new projects or need new equipment. He sets everything up and arranges times with their personnel, us, and/or our vendor.

The personal interaction with the company from the president to the help desk is unsurpassed. They are CJIS compliant and have done a lot of work to help us pass our CJIS audits. They care about the safety of our network and our backups.

Ascent Data has made my job less stressful and easier knowing that I can count on them to help with any computer problems we have.

– Sharon Wilkes, Police Operations Coordinator, Lower Burrell Police Department

Seven Reasons To Engage With Us

1

We Respond Within 5 Minutes Or Less. The average amount of time it takes for one of our clients to get on the phone with a technician who can start working on resolving their problem is less than two minutes. We know you're busy and we have made a sincere commitment to making sure your computer problems get fixed FAST. And since most repairs can be done remotely using our secure management tools, you don't have to wait around for a technician to show up.

2

No Geek-Speak. You and your employees deserve to have your questions answered in plain English (or Pittsburghese, if you prefer). Our account managers and support technicians will answer questions and clearly explain what is happening, so no one is confused or intimidated.

3

One Stop Shop. We provide, literally under one roof, the three key ingredients you need to securely serve your employees and clients, successfully manage your technology, and have the confidence that you know exactly who is accountable for what.

4

All Projects Are Completed On Time And On Budget. When you hire us to complete a project for you, we won't nickel-and-dime you with unforeseen or unexpected charges or delays. We guarantee to deliver precisely what we promised to deliver, on time and on budget, with no excuses.

5

Lower Costs, Waste And Complexity With Cloud Solutions. By utilizing cloud computing and other advanced technologies, we can eliminate the cost, complexity, and problems of managing your own in-house server while giving you more freedom, lowered costs, tighter security and instant disaster recovery.

6

We Won't Hold You Hostage. Many I.T. companies do NOT provide their clients with simple and easy-to-understand documentation that outlines key network resources, passwords, licenses, etc. By keeping that to themselves, I.T. companies keep their clients from hiring someone else. As a client of ours, we'll provide you with full, written documentation of your network and all the resources, software licenses, passwords, hardware, etc., in simple terms so YOU can understand it. We keep our clients by delivering exceptional service – not by keeping them in the dark.

7

Peace Of Mind. Because we monitor all our clients' networks 24/7/365, you never have to worry. We watch over your entire network, taking the management and hassle of maintaining it off your hands. This frees you to focus on your customers and running your business, not on your I.T. systems, security and backups.

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