6 Things to Expect from Your IT partner

Your information-technology partner business should be just that — a partner in every sense of the word.

On the surface, that may sound a little warm and fuzzy, and possibly a bit optimistic.

Some IT consultants may focus on fulfilling your basic needs. They provide you technology advice and supply whatever tangible products and service are necessary to facilitate your needs.

But what you should reasonably expect from an IT "partner" goes well beyond that. They should take a vested interest in your business, providing the benefits and guidance that are central to your company's growth and success.

Here are seven things to expect from your IT partner:

1. Technical expertise — and strong communication skills. Of course, an IT partner should be well-versed in the ins and outs of technology. But that sort of knowledge can be of little more than academic value if your partner doesn't have first-hand knowledge of how it applies to your business. "He should be first and foremost a businessperson who utilizes technology in a cost-effective manner to solve business problems," says Michael Crowe, director of the technology consulting and solutions group at Chicago-based Plante & Moran. "He can bridge the technology and communications gap that often exists between IT and a CEO's office."

2. An awareness of your budget — and resources. IT partners are proving increasingly essential to a broad range of small to medium-sized businesses. But that sort of critical function shouldn't necessarily come at a crippling expense. When looking for an IT partner, ask how fees are structured. A responsive IT partner certainly won't be free, but should be sympathetic to those sorts of services that can bleed business coffers dry. "For instance, they can provide access to high-level skills when needed, while paying a reduced rate for services such as a help-desk and repair services," says Dan Blumenthal, executive vice president of Miller Systems, a Boston-based technology concern. "Those are the costs that can consume the majority of an IT budget outside of project work."

3. An advocate who cuts through product hype. No IT partner stays afloat long if a business doesn't go along with his or her recommendations, be it a new software package or a plan to implement it. But truly effective partners go to bat for their client companies, identifying genuinely effective technical options. "An effective IT partner can bridge the gap between a vendor's product hype and what is truly an effective business solution," Crowe says. "He should also help determine if a company is using its current technology to its fullest capacity and show how to maximize the products it already owns."

4. A long-term planner, implementer, and strategist. Even the most carefully thought out technology plan is of little use if it grows old on the drawing board. An involved IT

partnership also means a handle on implementation, whether it's suggesting a gradual introduction over time or a veritable technology lost weekend where everything is shut down and changed over. Be sure your IT partner knows the best way to put technology recommendations into place. "An IT partner should also help an organization implement an IT plan," Crowe says. "A partner can help prioritize needs and plan an effective implementation strategy."

5. An industry watcher who maps technology advances and developments to your needs. A proactive IT partner stands ready to pinpoint new technology needs and to suggest updates and changes accordingly. That means keeping close tabs on your business's growth and development — as well as on developments in the world of technology might apply to your needs. "They should continually develop an understanding of the business at hand," Blumenthal says. "Then, they can offer strategic insight into how new solutions and technologies can reduce cost and streamline the operation."

6. A keen ability to troubleshoot and solve problems. It's unrealistic to think that any element of technology, no matter how expensive or sophisticated, is totally immune to breakdowns. Rather than wallowing in that tech Never-Never Land, an effective IT partner should always be ready to address technical problems quickly. Even better, your IT partner should go a step further and be proactive about overseeing regular maintenance and other steps that can head off snafus. "They should provide fast, cost-effective emergency response when problems can't be avoided," Blumenthal says. "But they should also provide scheduled upkeep of networked systems, security policies, backup and virus protection systems so that problems can be prevented as well."