

FEATURE: HARDWARE MAINTENANCE

Are you hardwired to your hardware supplier?



I'm always a little taken aback to find out how few businesses actually give real consideration to who is handling their hardware maintenance. There seems to be this propensity for companies to settle on a provider on day one and then give it no further thought. In the current economic climate, every business is looking to stay lean, and implement whatever cost saving initiatives they have at their disposal. Strangely hardware maintenance is one area which gets consistently overlooked when assessing company expenditure. Even the most frugal of businesses are often oblivious to just how much they are over spending on their current maintenance deal. While you may be limited to one particular software provider, there's certainly nothing to prevent you shopping around for a better deal and service from your hardware supplier.

Many businessmen I have spoke to over the years have expressed concern over switching their maintenance contracts. I can understand that hesitancy: trust and reliability are huge factors in finding the right supplier for your business, and remaining with one company creates something of a comfort zone. There seems to be this prevailing mindset that only one company is capable or has the knowledgebase necessary to fulfil your maintenance contracts. This of course is a fallacy.

The most important thing to realise is that there are other options out there. You should never feel tied to any one company. Think of it in the

same way you do any other service: if you don't feel like you are getting value for money, it's worth taking a look elsewhere. The good news is that often specialist hardware companies can actually offer a better and more complete service than you are currently getting. Hardware maintenance is their forte. They have years of accumulated experience working with businesses of all sizes, and not exactly the type of service that is required. The financial benefit to using one of these suppliers is that many specialist companies can achieve economies of scale on their service. This means they can cover all your maintenance requirements at a significantly reduced rate from your existing contract.



So what should you be looking for from your hardware company?

Engineers

A nationwide network of strategically located engineers is essential to providing an efficient service. You need to know that the company you select can guarantee that your business will be provided for at all times. Find out how many engineers they have on the road, and

see what call out options they offer. You then have something to compare against other maintenance firms.

In addition, effective hardware maintenance requires the ability to depot parts at strategically optimised locations. A full logistics network to transport stock between depot and customer site is of equally importance. Each of these areas must work seamlessly in concert to provide a best in class service. Make sure this is something your hardware company can deliver.

SLA – Service Level Agreements

Put simply, SLA's are clearly defined terms of service between you and your chosen hardware company. They should document the exact level of service you are entitled to, and thus provide a degree of measurability to your supplier's performance. It ensures that the company is held accountable for the standard of service they provide. You know what to expect from them, and if they are not meeting that standard, it's time to start asking questions.

Ongoing operations

An excellent support network is at the heart of a good service. You should have an extensive range of methods for logging support calls open to you. These include telephone, Email, and web based call logging. Your support calls should be administered through a centralised call management system. This system should in turn allow the customer to view the status of logged calls, and access key performance indicators in relation to the ongoing operations. A clear set of procedures should be documented and agreed upon by both parties in the event that a hardware maintenance call is not being dealt with in accordance with the previously agreed upon SLA's.

Partnership

The key component in the relationship between hardware supplier, software provider, and retailer is a sense of partnership. At all times, the hardware maintenance supplier should aim to operate in conjunction with the software provider to achieve the best possible outcome for you the customer. A quality service is reliant on proactive communication on the part of the hardware company. If you don't feel that this is the case with your current supplier, it may be time to start looking elsewhere.



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