

IT FREE

FALL

Lite



THE BUSINESS OWNER'S GUIDE TO AVOIDING TECHNOLOGY
PITFALLS

By

Nick Bernfeld & Paul Riendeau

It doesn't matter if you are at the helm of a growing business with lots of employees or if you proudly own a small "Mom and Pop" operation, every modern business needs technology to function. From payment processing to marketing and advertising to accounting, every business in existence today relies on at least some level of technology to conduct daily business operations.

When everything is working properly, this increased dependence on technology is a good thing. Computers and related technology provide your business with numerous advantages including increased productivity, better customer service, and accurate reporting that can be used to plan for the future.

But what happens when this technology doesn't work? This is the downside of technology and it can be frustrating at the very least. In extreme cases of technology failure, an entire business can be destroyed overnight. Whether it's a temporary setback or a major disaster, a technology failure is a serious concern -- or at least it should be. Lost revenue, a decreasing customer base, and a host of other issues can all result from even a relatively small network outage lasting only a few hours.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- How do you ensure that the investments you make in technology (both hardware and software) are actually working to support your business goals while inter-operating the way they should?
- How do you avoid the "latest and greatest" trends while investing in technology that offers a legitimate competitive advantage?
- How do you protect your business data from hackers, malware, faulty equipment, and even your own employees?

Do you know without a shadow of a doubt the answers to these questions? For most business owners, the answer is a resounding no. But that's okay – that's what IT Freefall is all about. Ensuring the integrity of your mission-critical data and assets isn't easy, but the good news is that it's a job you needn't worry about as a business owner. That is, of course, assuming you hire a competent computer consultant to manage these invaluable resources for your business.

Unfortunately, finding a competent consultant isn't as easy as simply opening up the yellow pages and making a few calls.

You've probably heard plenty of horror stories related to substandard IT work ranging from minor inconveniences to outright catastrophes that could cost thousands to fix (if you're lucky). If you've been in business for any amount of time, you may have even experienced some of these issues personally. The reason stories like this abound can be simplified into a single reason: lack of regulation.

Unlike many other professional fields (think lawyers, accountants, doctors, realtors, etc.) the computer industry is still in its infancy. This means there is little to no regulation concerning IT support. Anybody can open a computer repair business and although these people may have the best of intentions, without the proper knowledge and experience to get the job done right the first time, you could pay way too much, suffer poor network performance, or even lose all of your valuable business data in the blink of an eye (just to name a few).

The Costs of Bad Advice

Whether you choose a consultant who purposely misleads you or one that means well but doesn't have the experience to do a good job, the costs of bad advice are a surefire way to start an IT freefall (if your business isn't in one already). Bad advice can cost your business in many ways including:

- Paying for hardware, software, or random projects that do not reflect the scope and mission of your business.
- Inflated labor costs due to inexperience.
- Downtime, security breaches, and data loss.
- Paying to have another consultant fix a mess.
- Possible litigation costs.
- Frustration stemming from dealing with an unprofessional IT consultant.

Recovering from an IT freefall comes down to the following six concepts:

1. How to become an educated buyer of IT support services.
2. How to avoid spending excessive time and money working with incompetent or unethical consultants.
3. Learn to reduce overall IT costs without sacrificing performance or reliability
4. Secure your business network from malware, hackers, natural disasters, and data loss.
5. Eliminating computer problems that waste time and cause frustration.

6. Turn technology into a competitive advantage, not a drain of time, money and resources.

What Are Your Options When It Comes to IT Support?

To escape from an IT freefall, you need to take action. In other words, you need to find a solution that works for your business. There are a few different options, but as you will see, some are definitely better than others.

1. ***Do Nothing*** – While this may seem like a bad idea right from the start (trust us, it is), you'd be surprised by how many business owners practice this policy. Adhering to a reactive IT support policy means you end up paying a lot more when something goes wrong and even worse, the business could suffer from catastrophic loss as a result of not doing anything.
2. ***DIY Support*** – This is when either the business owner tries to perform IT maintenance and support tasks themselves or they task a tech-savvy employee with the job. In either case, that person isn't able to perform normal job functions, resulting in decreased productivity. Not to mention that is it nearly impossible for anyone but a professional IT consultant to stay current with technology trends and security threats...
3. ***Outsourcing to a Professional*** – There are a few different ways a business can outsource IT support. Options such as vendor support (this would be calling Microsoft, Dell, or any other manufacturer when a problem occurs) and computer support hotlines are common choices for businesses that don't understand the importance of proper IT support. These options are still reactive – no steps are taken to prevent failure from occurring in the first place.

None of these options are good and usually end up creating more frustration than anything. A better option is to hire a competent IT professional skilled in preventative network maintenance and fixing problems when they do occur.

Once you've decided to hire a competent IT professional, you still have more choices to make. There are three options within this category:

- Well-meaning, but incompetent, IT consultants just starting out on their own (usually a one-person operation).
- Large IT support companies (not usually appropriate for SMBs because these companies are accustomed to working with large corporations).

- Independently owned IT support firms that specialize in the needs of small business.

Which of these options do you think is best for your business? Although we may be a little biased, we suggest the independently owned IT support company. SNECS, LLC and other companies like it are the best options for many SMBs – especially when you considered the costs savings associated with a managed services plan.

How Do You Find the Perfect IT Consultant?

So far, we've spent a lot of time talking about all the bad things that can happen if you hire the wrong IT consultant (or choose not to hire one at all). When you've finally made the decision to find a competent business partner willing and capable of improving your IT network, how do you find the right person for the job?

We've compiled a list of 10 things you should look for when shopping for an IT support consultant. If your consultant of choice exhibits all 10 of these traits, the hardest part is behind you. Finding him or her – that can be the tricky part.

1. Qualifications & Experience

We've talked about this quite a bit already, but you need to understand that one of the biggest challenges about selecting the right computer consultant is avoiding the well-meaning but completely incompetent individual.

These people are not out to rip you off (at least not intentionally), but they lack the experience, knowledge, and/or tools to work on business networks. After all, even relatively simple business networks require professional attention that isn't required when setting up a home network. No matter what the shortcomings of the incompetent consultant may be, it always ends the same for the business owner: increased costs, more downtime, and a host of other adverse effects on the business that could have been avoided.

The more experienced a consultant is working with a variety of networks, the better your chances of getting the correct repair done the first time. One mistake that many business owners make is opting to hire a junior technician that seems to have “enough” experience because they charge much less than the more experienced consultant. The problem with this strategy is that the junior consultant may take twice as long to fix the same issue meaning that your final bill is actually more expensive than if you had chosen to work with the more experienced consultant in the first place.

Junior technicians may have only seen a couple of different network configurations and if they aren't already familiar with your business's network, how can they make reliable decisions about your business technology? They can't – at least not until they learn your network and who know how long that will take. In other words, don't let your business serve as a learning environment for someone – hire someone who already knows what they are doing.

2. Client References

You'd be surprised by how many business owners skip this essential step. After all, a consultant may be a better salesperson than they are a technician meaning that they say all the right things but fail to deliver on their promises once a contract has been signed. You need to check references before making a decision about a prospective consultant. When contacting references, be sure to ask:

- Did the consultant deliver on promises?
- Was the consultant responsive when issues arose?
- Did the consultant stay on schedule and deliver on time?
- Was billing accurate and as expected?
- Would you use him or her again? Why or why not?

Also consider asking references if there were any problems during the project. Unexpected problems happen but the mark of a truly professional consultant is how he or she handles these problems when they arise.

3. The Importance of Multiple Technicians

It doesn't matter how skilled or experienced a technician may be, it's impossible for that individual to know everything there is to know about every type of network. Having multiple technicians at your disposal means that you benefit from the combined knowledge of multiple professionals instead of just one consultant.

Having multiple technicians available that are all familiar with your network serves another important purpose. A one-person operation can't be expected to be available at all time. Illness, vacation, and working with another client are just a few of the reasons why relying on one person is a bad idea. If you have a network outage and your consultant isn't available, the effect on your business could be devastating.

A competent IT company uses multiple technicians that all work on projects together to some degree. This ensures that everyone is up-to-date with ongoing

client projects. While you may work mostly with a single person, you know that if that person is unavailable, there are other technicians who are already familiar with your business and ready to make repairs as needed.

At SNECS, for instance, technicians work together and discuss projects daily. Meetings are scheduled for large projects to discuss progress at the discretion of the lead tech assigned to the project. This ensures that everyone knows what's going on at any given time. Someone is always available to work on your project even when the lead technician is temporarily unavailable.

4. Availability and Response Time

When a problem arises, few things are more frustrating than waiting for support. You don't want a consultant who simply tells you to call their cell phone when something happens. What if they don't answer? How long will you have to wait for a call back or for help with your problem? You should seek to find a company that has more than one person as a backup so you can always get a hold of someone should a network issue occur.

5. Get Everything in Writing

When sitting down with a prospective computer consultant, that person is likely to tell you many things about how they operate their business and what kind of service you can expect if you choose to hire them to manage your network. While verbal communication is important (we'll talk about this shortly), the promises made by your consultant should all be in writing. After all, if they fail to uphold their end of the bargain and all you have is a verbal agreement, how can you actually prove what the consultant did or didn't promise as part of the deal?

6. Insurance

There are two types of insurance every qualified insurance consultant should maintain for your protection. Workers compensation insurance is the first one. This is especially important when a project requires on-site work in your office. If one of their technicians gets hurt on the job, you could be sued for medical bills and lost wages if the consulting company doesn't maintain adequate workers compensations insurance.

Something as simple as a trip-and-fall incident could cost your business thousands of dollars if the consulting firm's insurance doesn't cover the employee for these types of injuries.

Any support company you hire should also have general business liability insurance that protects your business in the event that something goes wrong during the project. A mistake could result in excessive downtime for your business, catastrophic data loss, or equipment damage. If the company you hire doesn't have liability insurance, you could be stuck paying for these issues even though it wasn't your fault.

7. Understanding Your Business

What you want is a business partner – someone invested in helping your business succeed by making sound technology recommendations. What you don't want is a computer geek that knows the technology like the back of his or her hand but couldn't care less about how network changes may affect your business.

You're paying for a consultant that cares about your business (or at least you should be). If you don't feel like your support team is actively helping you to improve your business processes by leveraging technology solutions that are relevant, it's time to look elsewhere for network support.

To illustrate this concept more clearly, SNECS always try to think “outside the box” when clients approach us with a request. For instance, we recently had a customer mention that they would like to be able to perform inventory-related tasks faster and more efficiently.

We setup a new system using wireless scanners integrated into their existing inventory system so they could scan inventory and keep an accurate count of all in-stock items. Differences between scanned inventory counts and expected quantity based on the last report are automatically reported. We were able to streamline this tedious process using a technology solution that made sense for the customer. We try to create customized solutions for all of our clients in a similar manner – can you say that about your existing IT services company?

8. Professional Appearance and Demeanor

Although some network maintenance can be performed remotely, there are bound to be times when a network technician needs to perform work on-site in your office. Do you really want a disheveled, sloppy looking tech showing up at your place of business? It happens all too often and if a customer sees this person walking around your office they may question doing business with you in the future.

9. Detailed Invoicing

When you receive an invoice from your consultant, it should specify what work was done, why it was done, and the project it is connected to at a minimum. Poor invoicing makes accounting more difficult and it could very well result in you paying more for services than you should.

10. Clear Communication

Avoiding the headaches (and expenses) associated with poor communication isn't difficult if you know what to look for. Here are some sure signs that your IT consultant is a poor communicator:

- The consultant frequently uses terms you don't understand.
- He or she frequently sticks to the basics and refrains from asking questions that would help them to understand your business better.
- The consultant doesn't explain the reasoning behind recommendations and expects you to accept these recommendations at face value.
- Things you discuss with the consultant are not put in writing.
- He or she doesn't clearly explain how the work will be done.
- Deadlines are missed without warning or explanation.

As long as any consultant you choose meets all the above requirements, you are well on your way to arresting your IT freefall. But there's one other thing you need to consider – the benefits of a managed service plan.

How Managed Services Work and Why It's Important for Your Business

Remote management technology allows your computer consultant to perform most maintenance tasks without actually coming to the office. In fact, when done correctly, you'll never even know most maintenance is being performed and it will have little to no impact on your business's work flow. When restarts and other disruptive maintenance actions are required, your consultant can schedule these for hours when your business isn't open (in most cases). This is the beauty of managed services.

Basically, managed services work by charging a fixed monthly fee for regularly scheduled maintenance, virus protection updates, data back-ups, security patches, network performance monitoring, and ensuring firewall and other security settings are actively protecting your network.

Rather than hiring a full-time IT professional, managed services take over required network maintenance for a fraction of the cost.

At SNECS, this is what we do best. We feel that proactive maintenance is the single best way to prevent potential IT disasters while ensuring that your technology assets are working for you, not against you.

If you would like to learn more about managed services and how our Office Solutions Packages can improve your business, give us a call at (401)762-0660 or shoot us an email at business@snecsllc.com

We want to help you stop your IT freefall and it doesn't have to be as complicated or as expensive as you think.

Oh, by the way, if you want more information about some of the things we discussed in this summary, be sure to check out <http://www.ITfreefall.com> to get exclusive access to bonus materials.

Sincerely,

Nick & Paul