

How to Hire an IT Services Firm for Your Specialty Medical Practice



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ABOUT THIS WHITEPAPER

Choosing an Information Technology (IT) provider for your small to medium-sized business can be an intimidating process. After all, the very act of hiring a “consultant” is in itself an admission that you don’t know all the answers. If you did know the answers you wouldn’t need to consult with anyone. The matter is further complicated by the very specialized needs of the modern medical practice. In this whitepaper, I will outline several issues and questions that should help you determine if you are deriving the best value from your current IT services provider. Or, if you are currently seeking a provider, this guide will make your selection process easier by arming you with specific questions to ask and guiding you around the common pitfalls in the selection process.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Many medical practices have entrusted their computing needs to individuals or small firms that lack the depth and basic resources to offer any real enduring value. I can assure you that a shortage of IT companies has never been a problem. The real issue is separating the counterfeits from the genuine articles. Many would-be entrepreneurs have decided to “hang a shingle”, print some cards and get into the business. However, it is important to identify second-rate providers before you’ve hired them.

Here are some common complaints from practices that have hired counterfeits:

- *“When I call them, they don’t call me back”*
- *“They come here to fix the same problems repeatedly” [and bill me for it]*
- *“They send different people every time” [causing me to explain my problem several times]*
- *“They take too long to respond to our needs”*
- *“I feel like they are learning on my time” [and billing me for it]*

Most of them genuinely do want to solve your problem in the shortest amount of time possible. The issue is that they probably lack the training and basic resources to make it happen. I am confident in this regard since many of our new clients have come to us as a result of their frustration with an inept provider.

A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Today’s modern medical practices have IT needs that transcend the basic support and implementation of a clinical and practice management software system. In the “old days”, practices relied solely on the day to day operation of their patient billing and scheduling system. When problems arose, they simply called the respective software company. However, with the proliferation of the PC and Internet in the medical practice, a separation is now taking place. Frequently, practice management software vendors refuse to support you in matters unrelated to their particular software. Furthermore, they often lack the qualifications and personalized service needed to design and implement an effective overall IT strategy.

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New developments in areas such as electronic medical records (EMR), digital radiography and electronic prescriptions have caused physicians and practice administrators to take a serious look at the state of their IT. Implementation of these imminent technologies requires a solid foundation of stable computers, servers and Internet connectivity in a standards-based, secure networking environment. Physicians and Practice Managers need to establish a rock solid relationship with a proven IT services provider, one that is both cognizant of the current environment and qualified to deliver appropriate solutions for your particular needs.

SIZING UP THE RIGHT IT SERVICES FIRM

After you make the decision that you need IT services that transcend clinical and practice management software, it's time to seek out and build a relationship with a firm. For purposes of this whitepaper, we will assume a mutual understanding of the definition of IT services firm. Here is a very general description:

A professional services firm with the qualifications and resources to recommend, design, implement and support solid technology solutions from inception through the entire lifecycle, in effect becoming a virtual IT department to your practice.

Here are some questions that you can ask prospective vendors, along with explanations. I will also give you some guidance on how to accurately interpret their answers.

How long the firm been in business?

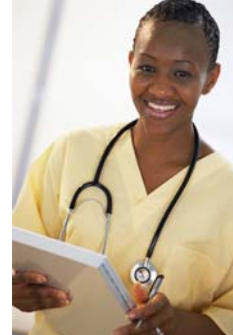
Vendors expect this question and are quite ready for it. The answer they give is frequently embellished. As a general rule of thumb, you might consider that a firm that has been in business for less than five years is still in its infancy or "startup" mode.

How many people work at the firm? Do some staff members engage in multiple roles?

The answer to this question, like the previous one, must be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. Vendors will try to overstate this number by counting people more than once. Of the total amount of employees, what is the breakdown per role? Is there any one person performing more than one role? It is common in some small IT firms that a few people, perhaps even the proprietor, may perform several functions including sales, proposals, design, implementation and technical support. People in this situation are likely to be overstressed and far less responsive to your needs than a firm with several people having the time and resources to dedicate to specific tasks. This scenario is also indicative of a startup or relatively new firm.

Can the firm provide proof of fundamental and essential business insurance coverage?

Unfortunately, in the highly fragmented world of computer consulting services, there are lots of half-baked "businesses" out there that neglect even the most basic of issues. At the absolute minimum, the firm that you engage should be able to produce a standard form called a "Certificate of Liability Insurance" This firm should outline who their insurance companies are, the types of coverage in effect, and the respective policy numbers and expiration dates. Firms that can not produce this document or that do not have "General Liability" and "Worker's Compensation" coverage should be eliminated from the pool of candidates.



Does the firm offer after-hours and weekend support?

What happens if you need support after traditional business hours or on weekends? Does the firm have the systems and resources in place to be able to handle such requests? Proceed with caution. Virtually all vendors will answer "yes", but what exactly does that mean? Feel free to dig deeper. For example, if they are offering to give you a technician's pager or cellular phone number, is that enough? What if that person is on vacation, out of town or busy with another client? What you are looking for here is a clearly defined process for after-hours escalations.

What is the prospective firm's specific experience in the healthcare industry?

You definitely want to hire a firm that has recent experience in the healthcare arena. This means that the firm is currently supporting multiple healthcare clients on an almost daily basis. Due to the ever changing nature of IT and healthcare, past experience isn't enough. Ask the vendor for a minimum of three healthcare references, including name, title, and telephone number. Explain that you will be calling them and asking frank questions about the services rendered to them by their firm.

Ask for several current references outside the healthcare field.

Most IT services firms don't limit themselves to a single industry. Ask for non-healthcare references as well. Obviously, if the firm is worthy of your business and has a great reputation, this request should be eagerly accepted and fulfilled in short order. When you get the references, be sure to allot ample time to actually call each and every one of them. Verify and note the types of services that were rendered and the dates the services took place. Ask candid questions such as "would you recommend this firm without reservation?" Any hesitation should be thoroughly scrutinized.

Is the firm willing to invest substantial time to earn your business?

A prospective IT services firm should be willing to invest time and effort to clearly understand your goals as well as your particular work environment. The vendor should not view this as a billable event. Rather, a well-intentioned firm might offer to do some initial discovery work as a complete "value-add" in order to demonstrate their desire to earn your business. My firm typically handles this through the offer of a free site-survey.

Can the firm offer "one-stop-shopping" for all IT related goods and services?

The firm that you choose should be able to offer you nearly all of the IT products that you might need without going to a third party. Some IT firms do not sell hardware and software products for various reasons. Some firms simply don't want to be involved with handling commoditized items such as PCs, servers, shrink-wrapped software and cables. Small IT firms might lack the proper credit to be able to purchase the goods on your behalf and offer payment terms. You should expect convenience and efficiency. Imagine the added hassle of having to source technical goods on your own. Who will handle the return of defective equipment, or something shipped in error? The firm that you engage should meet the following requirements in this area:

- Ability to offer you full payment terms and various forms of extended financing on IT hardware and software
- Willingness to source the correct hardware and software for your needs as a value-added service, at no additional cost.
- Handle all returns or issues regarding delivery on your behalf

Have you considered how you are going to request and obtain support?

The most common way is simply by calling the office of your vendor. If your vendor does not have an office or relies on cellular phones or pagers as a primary means of communication, you are leaving yourself open to serious reliability concerns. Would you hire an accountant or attorney that lacked an office with a telephone? When you call the vendor you should expect that a human being should answer the phone and direct you to the correct person or department. If no one happens to be available or it is after hours, there should be a clear escalation process in place so that your request is handled expeditiously. In addition to phoning in your support request, you should also be able to e-mail your request and/or be able to enter the request on the vendor's web site. If the vendor does not have a web site, consider it a red flag.

A serious IT services firm will subscribe to one of the many premium services that allows them to connect to any machine and remotely control it without reliance upon software.

Does the firm have the ability to perform services from remote, without setting foot in your office?

Accept the answer to this question with skepticism. While nearly all firms will quickly respond with a “yes”, the manner in which remote support is administered must be considered. Since the advent of PCs and modems, software has been available to allow one computer to connect to another and take “remote control”. This is not what you’re looking for from the vendor. Be specific and ask this question: *“Do you have the ability to connect and remotely control any PC or server without having to install any software whatsoever on it?”* A serious IT services firm will subscribe to one of the many premium services that allow them to connect to any machine and remotely control it without reliance upon software. This is a huge benefit and convenience to the client. Be wary of a firm that uses shrink-wrapped software solutions such as pcAnywhere™ that must be installed and maintained on every machine.

Aside from the traditional services that the IT firm will provide, what other value-added benefits does the firm offer?

Most relationships with professional firms such as attorneys, accountants and financial advisors come with perks that are available simply as an added benefit of the relationship that you have with them. For example, you may call your accountant and ask for advice on whether you should purchase or lease your daughter’s car. Your financial advisor may invite you to attend a free class on saving for college education. The relationship with a solid IT services firm shouldn’t be any different. You need to demand more depth from the IT provider than merely billing for services rendered. For example, in addition to the technicians that perform the hands-on services, you should have senior members of the firm (10+ years of experience) available at your disposal to discuss “big picture” IT strategy and direction. At my firm, we call this service “Virtual CIO”. It’s available to all of our clients and is never billed. I routinely participate in meetings, conference calls and planning sessions with my clients as a 100% value-add.



How are support calls or issues tracked by the firm? Do they have advanced customer relationship management (CRM) software?

An IT services firm should have advanced software in place to accept, track, log, review and report on all types of activities with their clients. Your current or prospective vendor should be able to deliver a presentation or demonstration on how requests for support are logged and tracked from inception to final resolution. This type of software, commonly called CRM, delivers great value to clients. Among many other benefits, it allows services firms to clearly document and log all activities related to the ongoing support of their clients and share that information with their customers. Some examples of popular CRM software packages or services include Salesforce.com® and SalesLogix®

Is your current or future IT vendor providing you with clear and concise documentation and visual diagrams of your IT environment?

We have run across many clients and prospects that have told us about their IT vendor’s unwillingness to provide them with documentation or network diagrams pertaining to their IT environment. If your gut is telling you that your vendor is making a concerted effort to avoid documentation in an effort to protect their job security, seek another vendor’s advice immediately.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

While the marketplace for IT services firms continues to grow in volume, it remains highly fragmented and overcast with startups and neophytes that can cause a multitude of problems for you and your practice. Great care should be taken to filter out firms that offer little or no value-added services and raise concerns such as those mentioned in this whitepaper.

Communicate openly and honestly with your current or prospective vendor to ensure that the services that they provide are creating lasting material value to your practice with minimal frustration.

Communicate openly and honestly with your current or prospective vendor to ensure that the services that they provide are creating lasting material value to your practice with minimal frustration. It is my hope that after reading this paper you will be empowered to make better, more informed IT choices and acquire the maximum value and return on investment for your hard earned IT services dollars.



Feel free to drop me an e-mail at dan.haurey@exigent.net with any questions, comments or suggestions. I look forward to hearing from you.