



PANOPTICS

Call: 0203 137 6351

Email: hello@panoptics.com

How to select an IT provider

The challenge of selecting an
IT service provider and how
to ensure you always pick the
right partner

Businesses today are inundated with opportunities to adopt new technology or change service provider, but how should a business go about selecting a supplier from such a diverse and sometimes difficult to understand marketplace?

When a new business requirement arises or a problem manifests with an existing IT & Technology provider, businesses often approach the IT market in one of three ways; they either extend an established close relationship with a current supplier who also offers other services, or they reach out to their known network for recommendations and guidance, or failing that they resort to fresh research to find a completely new unknown supplier from the multitude on offer. Regardless of approach, the real challenge is how a business ensures they pick the right provider.

How does the market look today and why?

Traditionally there were specialist IT companies, each focussed on the supply of specific technology, be it IT hardware, WAN, storage or even print devices. However, these lines of specialism are blurring as providers migrate into full service supply across a range of business requirements and often now offer a large range of services and solutions to meet a business's technology requirements.

This transformation of the IT sector is due to a couple of key factors that have influenced how buyers expect to consume the services on offer, along with how the service providers wish to deliver the complete end solution. Firstly the market has matured and the sheer volume of providers increased to such an extent that it is no longer enough to be excellent in just one technology if you want to compete. Secondly the consumers have effectively collapsed the supply chain by rationalising their suppliers and reducing the number of providers used to deliver the services they require so as to make it more efficient for themselves. Lastly, and possibly most importantly, technology is not only converging but accelerating rapidly so applications have to work everywhere and with every other piece of technology. With this in mind an expectation for the technology to be portable has been established, so customers are no longer tied to a vendor and instead consume the service as though a utility – turning on when required and off when not.

The challenges faced within the market landscape

As such, consumers must now evaluate the suppliers on offer with a fresh approach, as the goal is to find an IT provider who can provide solutions for the multitude of diverse requirements any modern business needs today – which inevitably makes the process more complicated as significantly more trust must be established in the supplier before such an important decision is made.

Businesses can no longer rely solely on the badge of the vendor – gone are the days where faith in a HP device or BT circuit, for instance, to do what they say they'll do, is enough to satisfy a decision on the adoption of a supplier. Nowadays, you are not only buying into the vendor but the supplier as well, who has layered the services your business requires on top of this technology and is using the vendor to simply facilitate the delivery of these services in some shape or form. Therefore the level of due diligence required has understandably increased and more attention to Service Level Agreements, cultural alignment with your business and other key factors is necessary before a confident decision on the adoption of the service and provider can be made.

The unfortunate culmination of this change within the IT landscape is that it can be considerably more confusing for businesses to navigate it and find the perfect provider for their requirement.

Without being a particularly savvy buyer who intrinsically understands exactly what is trying to be purchased, these changes within the IT landscape has unfortunately made the process of selecting a new IT provider considerably more confusing and challenging. As with all technology, the service or solution you are trying to purchase will also likely be littered with jargon and abbreviations, yet further complicating your understanding of the product itself and how to get the best out of it. As a result of these complications, a business will find itself in a position whereby it needs to either learn a lot about the technology prior to purchase to ensure they get exactly what they want or find a partner to help and is prepared to educate the business into making the right choice.

The importance of selecting the right IT provider

IT can be complicated – never more so then when the wrong partner is chosen to be worked with – which is why it's so important to make the right selection. However, there is no denying that it is difficult to find the right partner which will guide you through all the hurdles and challenges adopting a new service or provider can throw at you.

It is understandable that all suppliers will support you during the sales cycle, after all their focus is on the sale and revenue generation, but the right partner will take the time to understand the need in depth in turn helping you through the sales process and beyond by ensuring the chosen solution will do what it needs to do today, tomorrow and in the future. This can only be achieved if the provider takes the time to educate you through the process – what have you not considered and what do you need to take on board for the future. More importantly, the right provider will be there when a poor decision is made and the technology actually does not meet the requirements now or in the future, helping you mitigate the risk and reducing its impact by ensuring you find the correct solution instead.

Because so much trust must now be placed on the supplier chosen and technology they use, it is imperative that at time of purchase you are confident that your business can grow with their support and the solutions bought are sustainable now and in the future. Although it is difficult to ensure you have a long lasting relationship who will get you over every hurdle you may face, taking the time and conducting the necessary due diligence will pay dividends in the long run.

But what are the pitfalls if you don't select wisely? This really depends on the solution and supplier chosen – if the supplier is unhelpful now that a problem has arisen it is quite likely that not enough time was taken in the selection process and you may find yourself in a situation that is difficult or even impossible to pick your way out of. Therefore always make sure the proper appropriate level of due diligence is conducted in relation to the size of the investment and the importance of the service to your business.

The impact on the IT supplier

Interestingly it is also just as important for the IT provider themselves to select the right businesses to work with. Other than initial revenue generation there is no benefit for either party when a business relationship simply isn't the right fit.

From Panoptics perspective, for example, it is essential that all our engagements are with businesses that are culturally aligned with how we work, otherwise we know that we run a higher risk of being exposed to business impacts that could have been avoided which may lead to a dissatisfied customer – two outcomes that a service provider should avoid at all costs. For instance, a customer who is solely focussed on price will not realise the true benefit of working with a IT service provider such as Panoptics, as our business model is designed to provide the best solution for the requirement and get the best out of our people by assisting the customer in the decision process from the outset.

Why is it so complicated to select the right service provider?

The crux of the problem is that to get it right you first need to look inwards, consider the complications of working with your business and take ownership of what you're trying to achieve by selecting a new supplier or service.

Furthermore, honesty is paramount but is something that doesn't come naturally to all businesses when developing a new business relationship. To get the best end result, it is essential that you are

honest from the outset with both yourself and what you're telling the provider, as it's all too easy to be guarded about the information shared whilst getting drawn into a focus on getting the best possible deal, which can often be the problem for owner/operator businesses where every extra pound spent is essentially another pound off the bottom line.

With this in mind, the real challenge is to understand what the "best possible deal" actually means for your business. This in most cases is not simply just the cheapest price, but a combination of factors that together mean that the provider chosen can give you several benefits that total the deal – for instance, will the provider work outside of office hours in case you have a problem or can they offer supplementary services that will help your business grow, are all factors that should be considered.

Additionally, it can be hard to cut through the sales waffle and discover a true partner, which is ultimately what all businesses should be trying to find when selecting a new IT provider – as they will engage with you completely and help you make the right decisions rather than just supply what you have requested with little consideration of whether it is right for your business or not. Therefore, to determine the type of supplier you are engaged with, it is important to consider factors such as – do they work in the same way as your business, do they understand the ramifications of problem experienced by your business and will they be available to support you at all critical times, do they understand the level of knowledge you do or don't have and are they prepared to help you close the gap. With these things considered it will become clearer those suppliers that are just that, and those suppliers who will partner with you for greater benefits.

However, possibly the greatest complication for any business when selecting a new IT or Tech provider is FEAR! Virtually everyone is frightened to some degree of making a bad decision. Add on top of that, the additional pressure of big budgets or strategic decisions and it's inevitable that the decision process will take longer as emotions will play a further role in the entire process.

What's important to remember here though is that not deciding is actually the worst decision of them all. Even a bad decision can be followed up with a better decision to correct the course, but if you don't make a decision at all your requirement goes stale, the information you have goes out of date and you find yourself in a maelstrom of inability to finalise a decision, all the while still not servicing the requirement you outlined in the first place. The key here is to be effective in breaking down the decision into components, that are tangible and manageable to understand, in turn taking away the emotional side of decision making and allowing you to make a rational decision instead.

How to select an IT provider

The process may seem complicated for some businesses, however with the right approach everyone can select an IT provider that meets their needs. Our recommended high level approach would follow these simple steps:

- Begin by identifying what you want (e.g. a particular service or new supplier) and equally as importantly why you want it – consider how important this new supply is to your business and do you have a framework to make a decision and adopt the provider or technology.
- Next, outline the timescales you must work to – when do you need the solution in place and what level of input can you afford to give the decision?
- Then evaluate the routes into the suppliers – for example, is there an existing supplier that you trust and could supply this requirement, or have you been recommended anyone that specialises in the solutions you are interested in, or do you have to consider the whole market and conduct research from the beginning to identify a suitable provider?
- The next step is to go out to the market – provide the identified suppliers with your broad level requirement and begin to discover how they would help you.
- By conducting the RFI (Request For Information) process you will then begin to understand whether there is a provider that you feel you could work with – for instance, do they respond to your enquiry in a manner that you need them to, is there a connection with them that you can see of benefit for future business dealings or requirements?
- Finally, once the preferred supplier has been identified, now you must determine the best way to get the best value out of the deal – remember, this should not just be about the price of the solution, but should consider any additional benefits of the proposed relationship and how the provider could support your growth aspirations via partnership.

But how do you actually evaluate the service, solution or provider on offer? A systematic approach, such as the above, is the appropriate steps for the selection process but it's also important, in our opinion, to work through a clear framework for evaluating exactly what's on offer. To do this we use a **T.R.U.S.T.** model as follows:

- **Technology** – Will the technology being purchased work today, tomorrow and as long as it is required?
- **Reliability** – How reliable is the supplier? What testing has been conducted to ensure they can do what they say they can? What resilience is built into the solution? (i.e. if you were to lose half the solution what impact would it have on your business and would you cope / continue to operate?)
- **Understanding** – Is there a joint understanding between your business and the supplier? Do you understand what their business model is and what is driving them? (i.e. are you purchasing what they are good at?)
- **Simplicity** – Does the supplier take the time to translate the technology and / or solution / service into business outcomes? (e.g. happier customers, cost savings) Do they take the time to understand what the purchase means for your business? (e.g. do they understand what an outage would mean to your business?)
- **Transformation** – If the purchase is big and strategic enough, does the supplier take the time to understand how this will help transform your business? Does your business also understand this? (e.g. when capacity volume is reached, what do you do to upgrade – do you scale out, do you buy more service?) How will the supplier help facilitate reaching your growth plans over the next 3 – 5 years?

However, you approach the evaluation and selection process, our advice is to not rush it – in particular when it is an important strategic decision and you're going to be engaged with the provider long into the future. At the end of the day, you need to be sure the provider can fill the gaps in your understanding of IT and that they are prepared to work with you. Flexibility is important, as are the SLA agreements you put in place, but ultimately you need them to help map the purchase all the way through to your business outcomes to gain complete confidence in the decision made.

What are the key metrics and accreditations to look for in an IT supplier?

The market is so diverse and the range of solutions so wide, it is almost impossible to suggest the definitive accreditations to look for when considering an IT provider. As with any industry, relevant ISO accreditations are a good sign but certainly not conclusive. More importantly you should consider the metrics and accreditations that are specifically relevant to the service or solution you are buying – e.g. if you're buying storage you need to ensure you are buying from an accredited storage supplier, if you're buying datacentre space you should check it's compatible with PCI dss & ISO 27001 to ensure your data is fully secure.

The key consideration though, especially if the purchase is big enough, is that the provider can explain why they have the accreditations they do, why they are important to the purchasing decision and how they compare to the rest of the market, as accreditations and awarding bodies differ so greatly from supplier to supplier.

When all the metrics and accreditations have been factored in to the decision, possibly the most critical realisation is for you to think about the importance of the technology itself, regardless of accreditations, and how it flows through to your customer base and whether it delivers everything your customers would expect from your business, as it will essentially be an extension of it.

The Perfect Partnership

So how can the perfect supplier, customer relationship be born?

As it's a two-way transaction, Panoptics feels it's important for IT providers to accept the role they play in the decision-making process and future relationship, so appropriately evaluate the opportunity and the client itself before committing to the sale. Without going through a similar evaluation process as the client, the IT provider will likely only be focussed on the revenue instead of whether they can genuinely help the client and whether the client is the right fit for their business.

How should an IT service provider evaluate a new business opportunity?

It is Panoptics approach to always understand why the customer is looking for the particular service or solution in the first place, as this gives significant insight into whether the solution will actually meet their requirements but also a deeper understanding of the motivations propelling the purchase so Panoptics (the IT service provider) can advise accordingly. It's equally as important to understand how the customer is going to make the purchase decision and exactly how much knowledge they have on the subject, so any advice or proposal can be tailored to them.

Although the reasoning behind these information prerequisites may seem sales orientated, they are really only used to ensure the customer is purchasing what they really need and that Panoptics is the right provider for them – after all everything an IT provider sells goes to form the reputation built, everything delivered to a customer will have a tail of service and long term relationship which bears upon the brands reputation when talked about, and is something that should not be forgotten during the sales process. As an IT provider, Panoptics believes that all IT providers should protect their IP and brand by approaching all sales opportunities ethically and with the best interests of both themselves and the customer in mind.

As an example – if an opportunity was taken to take on IT support for a new client that was not looking for a partner and did not want advice, but simply wanted the cheapest price per support ticket, all that would be achieved is a lot of anguish on both sides and neither Panoptics or the customer would ever be satisfied because there would be a significant amount of time wasted with such a culturally misaligned relationship. So, it's important to be upfront from the outset, to ensure both parties are closely matched.

From an IT provider's perspective, it's important to remember that there are some businesses that you simply can't help, so it's much more important to decline those opportunities and to focus on the businesses and customers that you can make a difference to. This in turn will eventually feed back into the cultural development of your business, the happiness of your employees and ultimately the service you deliver.

The perfect business and provider relationship

The perfect example of a quality engagement is one that leads to a true partnership. Panoptics enjoys many mutually beneficial relationships with our customers and have gone on to help develop their business in a multitude of industries, but to illustrate what it really means to develop a partnership its worth exploring a singular relationship.

Panoptics customer, an award-winning event venue in London, is a small organisation in terms of people yet a well-respected brand, catering to global players within cutting edge industries including many of the large tech firms. Understandably, this could have led to a need for an army of staff understanding technology, which would have taken their focus away from the core business of providing a great venue. Therefore, they needed a partner to concentrate on their core infrastructure to allow them to focus on their business and not the technology that underpins it.

However, where it becomes a genuine partnership and provides opportunities for everybody is when joint revenue streams can be developed out the back of the relationship. In this case the network Panoptics built allows the business, in turn, to offer world-class wireless connectivity services to their customers when they are at an event in the venue. This allows the business to generate additional revenue, as it does Panoptics, but more importantly it is also a contributing factor to why the venue is so much better than many others – the wireless never fails, they've had thousands of the most tech savvy exhibitors and people connect with absolutely no issues, and they've been able to provide an uplifted service to their end customers so everyone that visits can work as though they are in their own office which is traditionally very hard to achieve on scale, as most other venues will experience continued problems with free Wi-Fi including really slow connections. The outcome of this partnership is that with Panoptics support, the client receives the necessary IT it originally sourced but also the additional ability to generate revenue and improve their brand.

How can service providers simplify the selection process?

To achieve the “perfect” partnership, such as the one detailed above, IT providers need to ensure they are committed to making the selection process two way and simplify how they approach the engagement. The most important thing for a supplier to do is to listen more than they talk.

Every provider needs to understand what the client is trying to achieve to be able to translate and simplify the technology necessary, which is likely to be a multitude of moving parts, back into how it is going to achieve the business outcomes. This can be illustrated in real life examples, such as when a customer asks for a service desk or a WAN circuit for instance, they are not really asking for that product or service as it is simply the facilitator, they are really looking for the benefit it provides such as a faster internet connection or more knowledgeable and efficient IT support staff.

Furthermore, it's critical for the IT service provider to understand the complications that exist within the customer, so it's clear what the problems are that may hinder the adoption of the service, in turn allowing the supplier to provide the necessary advice and recommendations which will ensure the service or solution eventually consumed is right for their application and objective. This way the service provider can be sure both parties are moving forward on a shared understanding and the solution is less likely to require any intervention to correct the course – it will just work!

The outcome of selecting an IT service provider

The simple outcome of selecting incorrectly is that for a business they'll find themselves going back to the contract, poring over the service levels and exploring what get out clauses are contained in it – all of which are inwardly focussed and a negative cycle. Essentially the business will find itself in battle mode, expelling a lot of energy and effort on routes to getting out of contract or making the provider do what they should be doing, all the while starting a new search and selection process to find a supplier that can supply what they actually need. So, it's clear that making the right decision in the first place is key.

So, what can be achieved by selecting the right IT provider? Firstly, the business is likely to consider “what else can be done with the technology?” before thinking about their customers and how they can generate more revenue, all the while providing greater value for their end customers which will inevitably lead to the business growing faster. All of which goes to show that selecting the right IT provider can be far more important than just the original IT service purchased.

Furthermore, and it may seem like a bit of a stretch, but with the right IT supply chain in place, the business will be happier, its people more productive and it will have the ability to grow more effectively. What this means is that by choosing the right IT provider, solution or service, a business doesn't have to focus on that element of the company and instead can just operate and focus on the core business activity, core customers and its core capabilities.

How to optimise the supplier relationship (and what can be achieved by doing so)

The right relationship is likely to be easy to optimise and provided you have chosen wisely, your new IT provider will be equally as open to developing the relationship further. The first step, which may seem unfamiliar to some businesses, is to be completely open and transparent with the provider (as you would with a partner in your personal life) which should also promote their own openness towards the relationship. It's important that areas of the service or relationship that aren't

working as well as first hoped are tackled with a non-judgemental approach regardless of where the fault lies – after all you intend to work with the supplier long term so it's important to get things out in the open and resolved as soon as possible. Likewise, it's important that businesses are transparent about their long-term aspirations and ideas of how they intend to get there, to ensure there is a complete fit with the provider's long term strategy which will safeguard the relationship as all parties will be pulling in the same direction.

By adopting this approach the business can find itself in a state of complete trust in the provider in turn facilitating a shift in relationship whereby the provider can genuinely help the business get to where it wants to be by reducing the amount of time on decisions and taking away the fear of technology capabilities. This state will inevitably drive more revenue for both the business and the provider yet further solidifying the partnership.

The key takeaway though, is that once you have been open to one another, the business is then more likely to be open to exploring what is on offer from the supplier to extend the benefits that can be realised from the relationship. It may be that only one solution out of numerous services they offer is consumed at the start of the relationship, but if it helps transform your business you are likely to be engaged with a provider who understands the nuances of your business and therefore when you ask for a specific solution or piece of advice, they intrinsically know why it is you've asked for it and how best to deliver it.

Why Panoptics?

The Panoptics default is a true IT partner, which is why a key factor that exists across all our clients is a need for a partner rather than just a supplier. What Panoptics delivers is not just the requested service or solution but an augmentation of a business's IT department so the business does not need to worry about the technology but more about the outcome, as they trust us to help them understand how the technology is used so they can get the best out of it.

With this in mind, Panoptics single most defining principle is to simplify complexity. By this, we mean that a business could find a supplier who talks to them about every possibility and draws them into continuously talking about technology and confusing IT acronyms – whilst we deliberately go the other way and simplify everything by translating technical jargon and the many different ways of approaching technology into business outcomes. We maintain a long-sighted customer strategy, none more so than with our managed service offering, whereby we are focussed on how our services and solutions can truly help the customer grow and enhance their business.

Why should a business consider Panoptics when evaluating their IT service provider needs?

Businesses should consider Panoptics for a multitude of reasons, but to illustrate one of our core strengths – if an organisation doesn't have an army of an IT team or are a fast growing or rapidly changing business that needs to quickly develop to serve the needs of their customers, Panoptics are a perfect fit as we have the skills and capabilities to fill the many gaps in IT such organisations require. Furthermore, Panoptics won't just provide a service as defined in the contract, but will explore with the business what that means in terms of what that actual solution is and the wider ramifications of that decision on the business.

Most importantly though, Panoptics should be considered as we approach IT service provision differently to the rest of the market. How do we define this? Firstly, we have the personnel that sets us apart from other small providers within the space. Our people are all experts within their respective field and are considerably more certified than most. This expertise has been borne out of our backgrounds, as every member of the team has cut their teeth & gained their expertise within much larger organisations but all believe in the premise of delivering IT differently, which has allowed us to condense these skills down into what is a small but well defined provider.

Secondly and increasingly more important, Panoptics consider the entire infrastructure stack. For instance, businesses could traditionally find a managed service provider who is also good with systems, or a WAN provider who is also competent with datacentres, or a network provider who is also respectable with telephony, however Panoptics has the capabilities to excel in them all. Therefore, any solution Panoptics designs and builds considers the entire infrastructure stack – so for instance when we build a storage solution we think about the wan, the datacentres, the VMware or Hyper-V layer in combination with how it all will be supported and managed. Thus, we think holistically about the solution for greater customer benefit rather than “we’ve got a great piece of technology that you want to buy” then have to fit it into your environment which is how most providers approach the sale.

Ultimately all our IT solutions have been built from the ground up, with each step ensuring the new technology builds upon the benefits of the last piece of technology employed, to ensure that every service or solution we deliver actually realises the objectives of our customers.

We're always available to discuss any IT Project and would welcome the opportunity to talk it through. Get in touch now and we're confident we will find the perfect solution for your business.

[Get in touch today.](#)