



PANOPTICS

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Guide: How to identify whether your IT provider “cuts the mustard”

An IT providers approach to
evaluating an IT provider

As an owner and operator of a business it is imperative to be able to trust suppliers and partners. Mostly, time is spent operating the business – e.g. selling houses, conducting market research or hosting events – but in order to do this effectively you need to be able to completely focus on the core business itself and not other contributing factors, which experience shows is only possible when you have stable and scalable Information Technology systems and supporting services.

Unfortunately, IT can be very complicated and choosing the right technology partner and service providers is also often difficult. In addition to this, requirements change as the business grows and your understanding of IT needs matures over time, typically based on outages, issues or problems experienced. Furthermore, outages can often actually steer your understanding of your needs, whilst emotion fills the hole left by technological uncertainty – all of which further confuse the picture and make the task of identifying problems with IT supply and what action needs to be taken that much more difficult. Therefore, having an idea from the outset of how to analyse your IT provision is key to ensuring your business is always operating effectively.

The Panoptics approach for evaluating an IT supplier

So how do you choose the right partner in the first place, and then how do you manage them and get the best out of the relationship? At Panoptics, we believe you should try and break down the factors effecting the decision into manageable chunks so that you can make an informed, rational decision rather than an emotional one. We believe ‘Trust’ is key to any relationship but understand it is a difficult metric to measure, so we approach any decision on the supply of a technology service based on the following criteria (which can be effectively applied to any technology provider – including Panoptics):

- **Technology**
What is available and what is right for us? (There are many choices which can be quite daunting)
- **Reliability**
Will the technology / partner / support mechanism do what we need it to when we need it to?
- **Understanding**
Does the supplier / partner care or at least understand the context of an outage or disruption of service / provision to our business? (If they don't, how can we get them to understand and therefore respond appropriately)
- **Simplicity**
How do we rationalise all of the options and map them onto our requirements?
- **Transformation**
Where do we need to be in 6/12/36 months and how do we ensure that whatever we choose now will allow us to achieve our long term plans?

With these headline questions in mind, you can then approach the decision in a more thorough and systematic manner by taking each point further and expanding on the questions to get a better picture as to where the fault lies and whether the provision of the service is the problem or the original specification.

Technology

If the technology you have is not working – e.g. a user cannot easily complete a task or a customer can't get the info they need – what is the exact problem? Is the issue related to any of the choices you made at time of adoption – e.g. the risks were highlighted but the cost to avoid was too high – or did you fully rely on the advice provided at purchase? Either way, the next step is to go to the provider and ask their advice on what to do next.

At this stage, the only thing that really matters is what can be done right now to resolve the situation or improve the service. Therefore, is the advice you are now being given corroborated by any of your peers or the internet? Are you being given options and is the service provider taking the time to explain them to you? All of these factors combined should then be considered in the evaluation of the technology itself and the supplier providing it, to determine suitability.

Reliability

In the event of a failure you need to ask is this the first time this has happened and really how much impact has it had? It is very easy to exaggerate the impact when a service is unavailable but at the same time if you are paying for something then you should receive what has been paid for.

The next thing to do is to dig out your service agreement. Do you understand how to log the fault quickly and easily? Is the support provider receptive and helpful? All of these questions need to be considered to determine the reliability of the supplier.

Additionally, you should have some form of formal agreement in place and hopefully taken the time to understand most of it when you signed up to the service, even though invariably the scenario encountered wasn't considered at the point of signing so may not be covered comprehensively or to the degree necessary to make it immediately obvious as to the provider's responsibilities. So, presuming that this is not a constantly occurring failure you now should be looking to 'beef up' the Service Level Agreement to cover this new scenario or at least understand how it is covered moving forward. If neither of these things are achievable with the existing supplier or it is a persistent problem with the service, then you need to start the process of changing supplier / service.

A real life example of this would be our reliance on connectivity which is key to the delivery of our Datacenter and WAN services. We need to be sure we have built enough resilience into our design and that the service providers we choose are capable of meeting their SLA's so we can pass them on to our customers. If they fail to meet their SLA's, so do we, which in turn has a negative impact on our business, therefore unless we can fully rely on their service which is backed by comprehensive and reliable SLA's, the provider could not be considered for supply.

Understanding

Is the reaction from the supplier in keeping with the criticality of the issue from your perspective?

For instance, if Panoptics were to have problems with one of our licencing partners the ramifications to our customers could be quite significant. An example of this could be our BaaS solution which is based on running Veeam as a rental service, so if there are problems with the reporting mechanism, our licence keys could expire and critical services to our clients may fail. From our business perspective, this failure would be huge and have an enormous impact on both the service we provide to our customers but also our reputation – so working with a partner that understands this and mitigates the risk is key.

You therefore need to be sure that any partner and supplier understands and reacts quickly if a problem arises, as well as advises accordingly on what to do to avoid issues in the first place. This can also cut the other way though – as a customer, it is advisable that you also understand how the supplier operates and build that understanding into your own operations to ensure that you don't place undue pressure on the process and cause a failure, but instead foster a true partnership.

Simplicity

In IT it's all too easy to over complicate and explain things in acronyms and very technical terms. Whilst you cannot simply expect everything to be dumbed down, you can expect to understand technical solutions and services in terms of how they will affect your business – afterall there is a time and a place for deep, technical understanding but this is at the design stage not at the point of consuming the service nor at the point of hitting a problem.

As an example, at Panoptics we would ensure the Service Level Agreements are fully understood and then rationalised so that they stack up with what our customers want – so there either needs to be flexibility or enough resilience in the supply that we can ensure our customer expectations are always met. Then in the event of an issue, is the supplier trying to help us understand what to do next or how we have misunderstood? Are they trying to help or defer responsibility? These are important questions to consider as the supplier is the expert and they should be trying to make it simple to consume their services as well as make it easy to change direction or grow in conjunction with the businesses requirements.

Transformation

The final area for consideration is how will the service and solution evolve with your business. Without a crystal ball and knowing exactly what is needed from the service over the coming months and years, how do you ensure you don't enter into an agreement that will actually inhibit the evolution of your business but instead enter into one that will help it grow? This conundrum is a difficult one to always get right, but its Panoptics belief that IT should no longer be considered a cost or a constraint – instead, it should be an enabler and the service provider chosen should be able to demonstrate how their provision empowers you.

With this in mind, the question to ask yourself is how does the technology and the provider help you to innovate and simplify your customer experience? These things become very apparent when a problem arises or the capacity of the current solution is reached, so at the point you feel the supplier is not delivering what is required, can you articulate what you now need and can they adapt to your new requirements?

Building upon trust

In summary you need to be able to trust your partners and suppliers and whilst a big part of trust is emotional you need to be able to rationalise what this means, which is most easily achieved and put to the test when you hit problems with the service supplied or your requirements change.

At Panoptics we strongly believe in cultivating true partnerships with all of our customers as well as suppliers, which is why we feel that you should only really consider changing suppliers if you are sure that you've tried hard to make the relationship work based on the T.R.U.S.T. approach – have you taken the time to understand exactly what you need, what you are buying and given the provider the chance to learn how to work with you? If after applying this methodology it is clear that the current provider cannot meet your expectations, you can take the things you have learnt to forge a more mature relationship with another partner / supplier.

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.](#)