

12 Questions to Ask Your Current Service Provider



DATA CENTER SOLUTIONS



Global Infrastructure Management
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Why should you choose a Third Party Maintenance Provider?

According to industry research, demand for third-party maintenance providers has increased since the start of the recession in 2008. Today's budget constraints and reduction in capital expenditures has forced companies to retain equipment for extended periods of time. Instead of constantly refreshing their hardware, companies are extending the lifetime of their existing equipment by turning to third party maintenance providers. This allows companies to reduce costs while maintaining the performance of their existing infrastructure. By choosing a third-party support provider companies benefit from:

- **Significantly reduced support costs as compared to the OEM.** In some cases companies save up to 50% off their OEM contracts. How is this possible? By customizing support levels. Instead of paying for an inflexible OEM support contract you only pay for the support levels you need.
- **Extending the life of existing infrastructure.** While OEMs tend to focus on selling new equipment, third party maintenance providers have no hardware agenda. Instead, their business priority is to deliver exceptional service and support to their customers.
- **Single point of contact for streamlined multivendor contract management.** Consolidating support providers into a single point of contact provides considerable cost savings and eliminates challenges related to managing multiple vendors and contracts.

You have many choices when it comes to choosing a support provider for your infrastructure. Make sure you make an informed decision by asking your current service provider the following twelve questions.

12 Questions to Ask Your Current Service Provider

1. WHAT STANDARD PROACTIVE SERVICES DO YOU INCLUDE TO HELP ME AVOID DOWNTIME?

In today's business technology environment, reducing downtime when it occurs is simply not enough. Providers should be proactive about ensuring the elapsed time and frequency of unplanned downtime incidents is continually reduced. Some ways to achieve this include monitoring, comprehensive reporting and education. Monitoring in its most basic form can provide real-time hardware alert notification to implement more rapid response when a failure does occur; but when leveraged as part of a proactive solution, it can identify problems and issues before they occur. Ensure your service provider can clearly define the standard services that help you proactively avoid downtime.

2. IS YOUR ON-SITE SLA PLANNED FOR ENGINEER RESPONSE, WITH PART IN HAND?

The majority of SLAs in the systems maintenance industry today are based around having a field engineer arrive on the customer's site within the designated response time. In such cases, no provision for having the necessary spare part arrive with the engineer is planned! If you are concerned about this, inquire how your service provider plans for spare parts logistics to meet your SLAs. Do they have a local parts bank? How is it stocked? How many customers in a given radius is it supporting? If the engineer arrives on-site within the SLA, but maintenance doesn't begin until after the SLA due to delinquent logistics management, does that meet the SLA per the terms of the contract? Having an engineer on-site is only half of the equation for systems maintenance.



3. WHAT IF MY OWN EMPLOYEES CAN HANDLE THE MAINTENANCE? CAN I GET A PRICE BREAK?

Why pay for SLA's you don't need? For systems that your IT staff is well-equipped to maintain internally, but only lacks problem diagnosis and spare parts, you may consider partnering with a provider that supports and encourages self-maintenance plans. With a combination of help desk technical support, logistics management and custom education for hardware maintenance and software administration, your IT staff may be capable of saving significant dollars for your organization. Find out if your provider will work with you to tailor an innovative plan specifically to meet your self-maintenance needs, providing only what you need and enabling you to enhance your internal efficiency - as well as your bottom-line.

4. WILL I TALK TO A LIVE PERSON WHEN I CALL IN AFTER-HOURS?

When does 7x24 coverage not really mean 7x24 coverage? Unfortunately, depending on your definition, it can occur all-too-often. If you enter a service relationship expecting live support around the clock, it may be a worthwhile exercise to ask your provider to clearly define their processes for handling after-hour support calls. Specifically, will you speak with a live person? If so, how many rings will it take for an answer? Will a help ticket be filed and opened in the same manner as during business hours? 7x24 should always mean 7x24, with identical processes and quality of support. Find out now how after-hours service is handled so that, should a problem occur, you aren't stuck with a failed critical machine for an undue amount of time, or until the next business morning, simply because it decided to crash at 5:01 p.m. on a Friday afternoon.

5. WHAT IS YOUR ABILITY TO DELIVER CONTINUITY OF SERVICE?

Service providers aren't supporting the coffee makers in your office - rather, they are ensuring your most critical, revenue-generating and regulatory compliant machines are highly available and performing at their peak levels. As such, in an ideal world, you would prefer to deal with technical employees - both on the phone in the call center and on the job in the field - who are familiar with your specific environment and have years of experience under their belts. Ask for sample resumes of the technical employees that will be assigned to your account, as well as certifications and experience. Technical employees - particularly those in tech support - have a historically high rate of voluntary turnover. Inquire to your service provider about their annual voluntary turnover rates in the call center and in the field. Anything more than 10%-20% may be a concern.

6. WHAT IF I CALL FOR A QUESTION AND THE EQUIPMENT IS NOT UNDER CONTRACT WITH YOU?

The mission of an organization that is focused on service - rather than selling more hardware or software - is to provide superior service quality that exceeds your expectations. These customer-centric providers understand that the data center is a complex, heterogeneous environment, and more than likely you have more than one vendor supporting your equipment therein. While your contract exists to state which systems are in fact placed under coverage, it may not be a bad idea to ask what would happen in the event that someone from your company logs a call for a system that is not under maintenance agreement. A similar situation can occur if you have hardware but not software support, and problem diagnosis shows your issue to be OS-related, or vice versa. Will your provider dismiss the call? Will they route it to the OEM? Will they take the call and charge you on a time and materials basis? It can be comforting to know that the organization's sole corporate objective is one and the same as your goal - to resume business activities as quickly as possible when costly downtime does occur. Ensure that your provider is capable and willing to solve issues from multiple sources beyond simply what is covered under contract. Learn what the process is, and determine if you are comfortable with it so that the first thought is to fix the problem and sort the contractual details out later.



7. HOW DO YOU HANDLE YOUR SPARING PROCESSES TO ENSURE YOU MEET THE SLAS?

Logistics management is a critical element of superior service quality. Your provider most likely has spare parts bank maps. Find out how well prepared they are to support your data center, and if in-depth reports on your specific environment are used to stock the banks established to support your company. Does the provider manage these banks themselves? If so, what leading-edge logistics management applications and processes do they utilize? How long is the drive from the bank to your data center? In some instances, having the spare parts bank on-site may be worthwhile - does your provider accommodate such requests? Make sure you understand your provider's processes for logistics management as well as the possible implications to their ability to effectively meet your SLAs.

8. HOW CAN YOU HELP ME CONSOLIDATE VENDORS FOR MULTIPLE PLATFORMS?

Everyone wants a single point of contact. As such, vendor consolidation is always a hot topic, and an elusive goal. The benefits include simplified vendor management, clear and total accountability, ease of use and, of course, cost reduction. When one service provider is responsible for multiple platforms and equipment types in your environment - be they Sun and HP UNIX hardware or UNIX and Linux operating systems - it is comforting to know that there is only one number to call if something goes awry. This provider will also likely know your specific environment well, enabling them to serve you better. When inquiring about multivendor support capabilities, it is essential to find out how much the provider does in-house versus subcontracting out. You don't want your provider simply performing vendor management - this can complicate escalation paths and lead to delays that can result in missed SLAs. No one service provider is an expert at supporting all types of equipment, so you must make the distinction on what is a reasonable expectation for direct support, and your provider should be able to disclose this information.

9. HOW DO YOU HANDLE END-OF-LIFE (EOL) SUPPORT?

Some OEMs have aggressive end-of-life (EOL) schedules in order to improve new product sales. Updates and support for these machines, which may still play a critical role in your data center environment for years to come, may become increasingly difficult unless your provider has a clearly defined process on how to support these servers going forward. Work with your provider and find out their capabilities before your equipment is end-of-life'd.

10. WHAT IS YOUR ESCALATION POLICY?

A clearly defined and formalized escalation path is a critical aspect of effective systems maintenance. Review the escalation policy with your provider and identify who is responsible and accountable for ensuring your issue is addressed with the urgent attention it deserves. Learn about those individuals on the escalation path, and negotiate with your service provider for a customized escalation flow if you are uncomfortable with the standard process. Although it will hopefully rarely occur, if an emergency situation that requires escalation should arise, you want to be able to rest assured that you will be given an actionable and timely solution, rather than the proverbial run-around.

11. CAN YOU SUPPORT MY REMOTE AND/OR INTERNATIONAL DATA CENTERS?

Is your provider a small regional player, or do they have a global footprint that will allow them to meet your growing needs as your business expands? Determine your future needs for international or remote support and ascertain whether your current provider will be able to realistically meet your aggressive SLA needs for multiple, geographically dispersed data centers throughout the United States and abroad. Is there a local sales representative? Parts banks? Do they provide direct national support for your key geographies, or will they have to rely on partners? How do they qualify and measure those partners? Do they take total accountability for partner performance? Whether you need multi-city or multi-national support now or in the future, find out how well-equipped your service provider is to meet your needs wherever the demand for your business takes your company's critical technology infrastructure.

12. WHAT OTHER VALUE-ADDED SERVICES CAN YOU OFFER MY ORGANIZATION?

In a further attempt to consolidate vendors, find out what other value-added services your provider can offer as part of your overall solution in order to create a customized and integrated complete support solution for your critical IT environment. Asset management, for example, can help you save money on support by helping you understand exactly what you have, and how it is being used, as well as identify potential upgrades, decommissions or modified SLA requirements. Education can go a long way toward enhancing your internal efficiency, and managed services for staff augmentation or call center support can help you better serve your customers. There is likely a roster of services that your provider can deliver to provide a more complete solution - find out what makes sense for you, and see if it can be bundled into your systems maintenance solution.

Conclusion

Before you sign any new contracts make sure to do your homework. Determine what you are looking for in a support partner and make sure to ask your current provider the 12 questions outlined here. If you aren't happy with the answers and you are looking for cost effective, flexible support, a third party systems maintenance provider may be the best choice for you.



The Akibia Difference

- **Single Point of Contact** – With deep technical knowledge across a wide range of server, storage, network and security platforms as well as operating systems and software, we provide best-in-class support for our clients' multivendor data center environments. Consolidating support providers into a single point of contact provides considerable cost savings for our clients.
- **Focus on Service** – Founded as an independent services provider in 1988, Akibia's cumulative knowledge, expertise, experience and best practices supporting, managing and optimizing mission-critical data centers enables us to deliver the highest quality of service.
- **Customer-Centric Services Philosophy** – Akibia's service philosophy is premised on enabling and empowering our clients and delivering a solution that meets their needs. Everything we do at Akibia emphasizes providing exceptional service and an excellent customer experience. Our TLC² philosophy motivates every employee to always 'Think Like a Customer,' promoting Trust, Loyalty and Commitment.
- **Cost-Effective Data Center Solutions** – In addition to focusing on providing excellent service, Akibia's hallmark flexibility and customized approach enables us to deliver cost-effective data center solutions that are tailored to the unique requirements of each client.

About Akibia

Akibia, a Zensar company, provides innovative Infrastructure Management solutions that enable leading companies worldwide to optimize, secure, manage and support their mission-critical infrastructure. As an independent advisor, Akibia partners with our customers to deliver solutions that improve the availability, reliability and performance of their data center, network and security infrastructure. Using its multi-shore capabilities, Akibia combines expert consulting, integration and support services with world-class customer service to help IT organizations reduce costs, increase efficiencies and manage risk in the data center. For more information visit www.akibia.com.