
WHITE PAPER

Guidance to getting value from your IT consultant

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Introduction

Many small to medium-sized businesses employ consultants to help them manage their company's networks and other information infrastructure. Ideally, bringing in a consultant can be a great way to buy high-value services on an ala carte basis. You pay only for what you need when you need it – or keep a professional on retainer at a lower cost than paying them as a full-time employee.

That is the ideal. At CyberLynk, however, we have seen too many situations in which our customers' relationships with IT consultants do not work to their benefit. In some cases, consultants are former dotcom or corporate staffers who are not aware of how different the needs of a small to mid-market company may be from those of their old employer. In other cases, it could be that the consultant is willfully running up the meter or up selling the client unnecessary services and/or hardware. We can't look into the hearts of consultants and determine what their motivations are. But we can identify some red flags that can help the non-technical professional determine when they are not being well served by their consultant.

Example Problem

Recently, CyberLynk had to intervene in a relationship between one of our business Internet clients -- the regional office of a major real estate company -- and its IT consultant. The consultant had run up a substantial bill over a two-week period trying to resolve a problem that was causing constant outbound traffic from the real estate company's workstations and slowing their network and Internet connection to a crawl. CyberLynk engineers informed the consultant and the real estate firm that the problem was being caused by a virus or worm – probably the Blaster virus or Sobig – that was scanning IP (Internet Protocol) addresses from the firm's servers/workstations in order to replicate itself. The consultant fervently denied that there was a virus at work on their client's system, and blamed the problem on the Internet Service Provider (ISP) – which in this case was CyberLynk. The consultant insisted the system it had designed for its client was protected from viruses/worms and that it was virus/worm free. As a last resort, CyberLynk threatened to turn off the real estate firm's service before the virus bogged down other routers as it looked for machines to infect. To help the client find quick resolution to the problem, CyberLynk offered to dispatch an engineer to troubleshoot the network. The real estate company opted for the CyberLynk engineer, and within 20 minutes of his arrival, the virus was identified, quarantined, and the problems were resolved. The cost for the CyberLynk engineer was less than \$180.00 - a far cry from what the real estate company lost in production and what it paid the consultant. Needless to say, the consultant's reputation is now in question.

Cause of Problem

In the case of the virus-infected real estate office, the issue was most likely caused by lack of experience and knowledge on the part of the consultant. But anytime problems go unresolved for long periods of time despite extensive hours billed by a consultant – or when a consultant attributes ongoing problems to the ISP – you may want to ask some hard questions about what is going on. IT consulting is not a commodity. A competent consultant charging a high hourly rate may yield a better value than an incompetent one charging a low billable rate. Not only can it take a less-skilled person five hours to accomplish what another may get done in 20 minutes, but as a problem goes unresolved, your business can incur direct and indirect expenses in lost productivity and diminished functionality of your network.

Technical knowledge is one area where a consultant may be lacking. Some consultants, however, may just try to apply large enterprise-oriented solutions to small and mid-market clients. The consultant in many cases may specify internal servers when it may be simpler and more cost-effective for the client to rely on external services. Internal DNS (Domain Name System) servers are one example. DNS is used to connect domain names to Internet protocol addresses on the Web, and to control email delivery. The content of this massive database changes regularly, and an internal server can become outdated quickly. Yet many consultants will specify an internal DNS server for a client when use of the ISP's server will do just as well if not better.

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Once again, in some cases, this might be attributable to the fact that a consultant is used to dealing with large corporations and automatically wants to design a large expensive system. In other cases, the consultant may be trying to maximize the amount of revenue coming from an individual client. Selling servers – which a consultant can usually make from stock parts – can be a very lucrative venture. Parts for a server might cost between \$500 and \$1,000 – but when purchased via the consultant, the cost can be \$5,000.00 or more.

Things To Look For

If a consultant does not at least offer the option of outsourcing functions that involve extensive hardware purchases that should send up a red flag. Hardware purchases involve high up-front costs, and the equipment is quickly outdated. For many companies, it makes better fiscal sense to allow someone else to bear these recurrent costs. But for the consultant, it can make better fiscal sense to sell the hardware and software – and collect ongoing residuals by troubleshooting and servicing the system.

Un-needed Hardware and Software

Firewalls are one common “bump” a consultant can use to increase a client’s expenditures. Firewalls are necessary tools to protect your network and data in situations where you are opening a port that allows those outside your building to access your network. As a general rule, if you are not opening any ports and your internal server is not accessible from the outside, you do not need a firewall – which can cost between \$7,000 and \$20,000. The routers CyberLynk includes with all broadband connections will properly block all hackers and attempts to access internal networks from the Internet.

Yet another common “bump” CyberLynk notices is the implementation of Microsoft Exchange Email servers. Have you ever wondered why your company is running a Microsoft Exchange Email server? For most companies, the Exchange Email server is not necessary. The licensing issues, constant upgrades, monthly Microsoft security patches, monthly/weekly maintenance, and basic troubleshooting can cost your company valuable time and money. Companies that do not have the proper IT staff to maintain an Exchange Email server will usually call CyberLynk for help. However, in most cases CyberLynk is unable to provide assistance since the consultant configured the server. Many small- and medium-size businesses must investigate the overall costs and benefits of having an Exchange Email Server. Ask yourself if your business can afford to be down for hours while you wait for your consultant to call back or send a tech out? There are alternatives such as a managed solution provided by most ISPs -- including CyberLynk.

CyberLynk’s Focus

With every Internet service CyberLynk sells, security, speed and reliability are priority number one. CyberLynk is in the business of making the customer’s Internet experience the best in the business. CyberLynk engineers pride themselves in being able to troubleshoot a wide range of issues that include both the Internet and internal networks. This type of troubleshooting is invaluable to every customer because CyberLynk understands how networks work both internally (on a customer’s network) and on the Internet. Many consultants today are only concerned with how the internal network works. They often lack the experience on how to maximize a customer’s Internet connection and manage their overall business needs. Consultants need to see the whole picture to provide solutions that give the customer the fastest return on investment. Consultants should also provide solutions that allow the customer’s employees to work faster and more efficiently.

CyberLynk deals with many consultants on weekly/monthly basis. This has given us an opportunity to qualify each one of them. Our experience has convinced us that not all consultants are competent. Many lack the knowledge and resources needed to properly serve their clients. When problems occur, your goal is to find resolution quickly and permanently. So -- because consultants cost money - - the one you contract with should have the experience and resources to quickly solve your problems. If a problem takes longer than a couple of hours to resolve, you should ask yourself if you have hired the right consultant.

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Conclusion

In the end, the rule of caveat emptor always applies. Buyer beware. But there is also a saying –“Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, Shame on me.” In dealing with technical consultants, you may be at a disadvantage as you are trusting that the consultant not only possesses the technical skills to help you operate your network, but you are also trusting that they have your best interest at heart. You may at times be fooled or taken advantage of. However, if you watch for red flags, no one should fool you twice. Keep your own counsel! Never be afraid to call CyberLynk to recommend a consultant or to intervene when your IT consultant stops making sense.

Six Automatic Red Flags:

- The consultant specifies numerous internal servers, including internal DNS servers, internal exchange servers and internal proxy servers.
- The consultant sells you software at higher-than-market rates.
- The consultant does not document the configuration of your network, servers and workstations.
- Server and workstation hardware cost more than market rates.
- Your consultant can never answer technical questions on the spot.
- Problems take days/weeks to resolve instead of hours.