

Computer maintenance and options for IT technical assistance

Not everyone with responsibility for IT decisions in a community organisation will have corresponding technical ability themselves. Be prepared to seek technical advice when needed.

The hallmark of good IT service - whether it is to maintain your hardware, fix 'glitches' in your network or software or advise you on upgrades and new systems - is that it is responsive to your organisation's needs and solves your problems quickly for a reasonable cost, and is able to communicate effectively with you.

Technical support services can be sourced from any of the following:

- **The company or individual who supplied your hardware:** Computers, monitors, printers etc will all come with a standard warranty. Your organisation may have paid extra for an extended period or warranty. If something goes wrong with your equipment, first check whether the warranty is still current. Even if it has expired, the supplier may be the most appropriate starting point.
- **The company or individual who developed your software.** If you have bought customised or tailored software – such as a customer management system specific to the needs of your organisation and reporting requirements for example - you should have a support contract for dealing with any problems that arise or new developments you want to propose.
- **The manufacturer of your hardware or software.** All major computer brands will all have service centres and customer help lines. For hardware outside of warranty periods, there will usually be a charge and the manufacturer may not be the cheapest option or the most convenient, since they generally require you to return the equipment needing repair to your nearest service centre. Major software brands often provide free online and telephone support services, and your organisation may have paid for an additional support contract.
- **A specialist IT service.** There are numerous commercial IT technical support services available, many of whom can also offer a 'remote' service. A remote service enables the technical support person to make direct contact via the internet with any computer that you are having problems with. This saves the time and cost of a service call to your office and is a cost effective and efficient way of obtaining technical support.
- **A volunteer with IT expertise.** Be cautious in using free technical assistance to make actual changes in your hardware or software infrastructure. Ensure that the person providing the assistance has appropriate experience and expertise, and remember that you may have to pay to have any problems caused by under qualified intervention.



In deciding who to go to for help:

1. Plan

Have a clear plan for your IT support, for both hardware maintenance and supply and software technical assistance. It is likely that you will seek help with different problems from several different sources, so use the appropriate support for the appropriate problem.

With system support, if possible, it is generally better to stick with a person or company you trust and who knows your needs, limitations and budget. Often support can be arranged on a contract basis, so you know in advance what you are paying for and don't have to make decisions during a crisis, for example when your computer system suddenly 'crashes'.

2. Learn from others' experience

You may find it helpful to talk with your colleagues in other not-for-profit organisations, particularly those that you consider to be good role models in terms of IT practices. They may be able to recommend IT maintenance and support services, or even give you pointers that help you fix problems yourself.

3. Do not compromise on prompt, good quality service

Not all local IT suppliers and providers will meet professional standards or have the capacity to support a large not-for-profit organisation. Compare prices and quality to assess whether you will be better off using a local person or perhaps a bigger out-of-town organisation. Remote support, using the internet or telephone, can be just as, if not more, efficient as someone coming to your office in person.

Use volunteer expertise when available, but be prepared to augment this with a paid service as necessary, if you are not getting the results you want and need. Just because someone has more knowledge and enthusiasm than you for computers does not necessarily mean they have the capacity to undertake the maintenance and technical support you need, but they may be extremely helpful in other ways, for example explaining computer jargon, tidying up your files, connecting new equipment and installing new software.

