

30 questions to ask an IT provider before you sign.

Most IT vendors know office environments. Far fewer understand PLCs, ERP uptime requirements, OT/IT segmentation, or what a stopped production line costs per hour. Put these questions to every provider you evaluate, including us, and score the answers the same way.

How to use this template. Score each answer from 1 (vague, generic, or evasive) to 5 (specific, evidenced, and relevant to your environment). Note every red flag you hear. Total the scores at the end, then apply the two rules in the scoring guide on the last page.

01 Manufacturing and OT/IT experience

QUESTION	RED FLAG TO LISTEN FOR	SCORE
1. How many manufacturing clients do you support today, and for how long on average?	Can't name a number, or the examples are all office-only businesses.	___ / 5
2. Describe a plant-floor system you support: what runs on it and what happens when it fails?	Answers only in terms of PCs and email, nothing about lines, controllers, or downtime cost.	___ / 5
3. Who on your team has hands-on OT experience (PLCs, HMIs, SCADA, industrial networks)?	"Our engineers can figure it out." OT is not a figure-it-out discipline.	___ / 5
4. How do you handle equipment that must run legacy operating systems?	"Everything should be upgraded." Some production systems can't be, they must be isolated.	___ / 5
5. What's your approach to working alongside machine vendors and integrators?	No answer for shared responsibility; expect finger-pointing when something breaks.	___ / 5

02 Response time and SLAs

QUESTION	RED FLAG TO LISTEN FOR	SCORE
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6. What response time do you commit to, in writing, for a production-down event?	SLAs quoted only for business hours, or no written commitment at all.	___ / 5
7. How do you triage a stopped line versus a routine ticket?	Everything goes in the same queue in the order it arrived.	___ / 5
8. When you call after hours with a production-down issue, how fast are you triaged, and does a real engineer own it through resolution?	An outsourced answering service that only logs a ticket and pages someone "as soon as possible," with no engineer accountable for the fix.	___ / 5
9. What percentage of issues do you resolve on first contact?	They don't measure it. If they don't measure it, they don't manage it.	___ / 5

03 ERP support and integration

QUESTION	RED FLAG TO LISTEN FOR	SCORE
10. Which ERP platforms do you support in production today?	None, or "we support whatever you have" with no named platforms.	___ / 5
11. How do you plan maintenance windows around our production schedule?	Patch schedules dictated by the vendor's convenience, not your calendar.	___ / 5
12. Describe an ERP outage you handled: cause, fix, and what changed afterward.	No real example, or the story ends at the fix with no prevention step.	___ / 5
13. How do you support integrations between ERP and shop-floor or warehouse systems?	"That's the ERP vendor's job." Integrations fail in the seams between vendors.	___ / 5

04 Cybersecurity and compliance

QUESTION	RED FLAG TO LISTEN FOR	SCORE
14. Walk me through your security stack: what tools, and who watches the alerts?	Antivirus and a firewall, nothing else. Or tools with nobody watching them.	___ / 5
15. How would you segment our OT network from our business network?	Blank stare, or "one flat network is easier to manage."	___ / 5

16. What's your experience with CMMC, NIST 800-171, or customer security questionnaires?	Unfamiliar with the frameworks your customers ask you about.	___ / 5
17. Have any of your clients been hit by ransomware? What happened?	"Never" from an established MSP is either dishonest or unexamined. The honest answer includes what changed.	___ / 5
18. How do you secure your own access to our systems?	Shared admin passwords, no MFA on their own tools. Their access is your attack surface.	___ / 5

05 Backup and disaster recovery

QUESTION	RED FLAG TO LISTEN FOR	SCORE
19. What's your backup methodology, and how often do you test restores?	Backups run but restores are never tested. An untested backup is a hope, not a plan.	___ / 5
20. How would you back up PLC programs and equipment configurations, not just servers?	They've never considered anything below the server layer.	___ / 5
21. What RTO would you commit to for our ERP system?	No number, or a number with no explanation of how they'd hit it.	___ / 5
22. Are your backups protected against ransomware (immutable or offline copies)?	Backups live on the same network with the same credentials as everything else.	___ / 5

06 Contract terms and pricing

QUESTION	RED FLAG TO LISTEN FOR	SCORE
23. What exactly is included in the monthly fee, and what bills separately?	Vague inclusions. Surprise "out of scope" invoices are the number one MSP complaint.	___ / 5
24. What are the exit terms if we're unhappy: notice period, data handover, offboarding cost?	Long lock-ins, undefined offboarding, or they've "never had anyone leave."	___ / 5
25. Who owns the documentation, passwords, and licenses: you or us?	The vendor holds your credentials and documentation hostage by default.	___ / 5
26. How do price increases work over the life of the agreement?	Unilateral increases with no cap and no notice period.	___ / 5

07 References

QUESTION	RED FLAG TO LISTEN FOR	SCORE
27. Give me two manufacturing references I can call, similar to us in size.	Only references from other industries, or reluctance to provide any.	___ / 5
28. (Ask the reference) What happens when something breaks at 6 a.m. on a production day?	The reference hesitates, or describes chasing the vendor for updates.	___ / 5
29. (Ask the reference) What do they get wrong? What would you change?	Nothing is perfect. A reference with no honest criticism was coached.	___ / 5
30. (Ask the reference) Have you renewed, and will you renew again?	A first-year client can't tell you what year three looks like.	___ / 5

Scoring guide

Total: ___ / 150 Red flags noted: ___

120–150 • Specialist

Specific, evidenced answers across the board. Check the references, then negotiate terms with confidence.

90–119 • Capable, with gaps

Solid on office IT, thinner on OT, ERP, or recovery. Probe the weak categories again before deciding. Ask who fills the gaps.

Below 90 • Keep looking

A generalist. Fine for many businesses; risky for an environment where downtime is measured in dollars per minute.

Two rules that override the score. First: two or more red flags in categories 4, 5, or 6 (security, recovery, contract) disqualify a vendor regardless of total. Second: never sign without calling at least one reference yourself. Ten minutes on the phone beats any sales deck.

Want help scoring what you heard?

Network Builders IT will walk your completed scorecard with you, vendor by vendor, and tell you honestly what the answers mean. And if you want our answers to these same 30 questions, book a discovery call and put us on the clock.

nbit.com/book-a-call

Book a 30-minute discovery call

[\(888\) 816-6248](tel:8888166248)

Talk to an engineer

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Email us your questions

