

tech support

new product and, in some cases, data conversions may be necessary. These steps alone can be a substantial effort. That is why pre-sales questions and research are so important—they help you to narrow your choices as much as possible.

Support From Your Peers

Asking your colleagues about products that you are considering is an excellent way to get presale support, and can also help you after you've made the purchase. Your peers will not usually have the bias of a publisher or manufacturer. You can also get feedback from the use of the product "in the trenches," that is to say during every day use, instead of from a glossy brochure or Web site.

Other sources of helpful support are online, such as Google or Wikipedia. For example, if you're comparing products from two vendors, search for both of them together to see published comparisons. Consider contributing your experience afterwards to online resources, such as relevant blogs or Wikipedia.

Support from the Publisher or Manufacturer

Software publishers and hardware manufacturers typically offer some degree of free technical support after the initial purchase of a product. Your firm should be aware of, and take advantage of this free support. This will help in various ways. You will become familiar with the procedures to obtain technical support from that publisher. If the product has a trial period, your comfort level with tech support could influence your decision to keep the product. And, you can gain a feel for the degree to which your firm might need independent consulting instead of assistance directly from the publisher.

II. Purchasing Tech support: Paid support from Publishers, Manufacturers and Software Publishers

There are a variety of approaches to purchasing technical support from a software publisher. It is possible that the nature and cost of purchasing tech support will influence your purchasing decisions. Some companies charge a flat fee per year regardless of the number of users or licenses your firm owns, and may include unlimited calls, as exemplified by the billing system Timeslips by Sage. Another approach is to charge an

annual fee for each license that your firm owns, which is the case for LexisNexis Front Office Powered by Time Matters. However, in the case of both Timeslips and Time Matters, your annual fee covers tech support, but not product upgrades. Another example of an annual fee per license is Worldox, a document management product. But in the case of Worldox, your annual fee covers both tech support *in addition to* future product upgrades. Still another approach is the way Microsoft handles technical support for some of its products, such as a database program called Microsoft SQL Server, which charges a per incident fee.

Hardware Manufacturers

Support for PC hardware: In some cases you may find it more cost effective to own a spare computer instead of paying for a service contract on each machine. Service contract fees have not fallen proportionately to the price of PCs, partially due to the increase in on-site labor costs and transportation costs. Since these services often cannot restore data that hasn't been backed-up, it may make more sense to invest in extra PCs and better backup instead. One exception is notebook (or laptop) PCs, which are more susceptible to physical damage and loss. The right coverage for these may include timely repair or replacement in the field and a tested system for restoring programs and data.

Support for printers: These are among the few machines in the office that actually need routine physical maintenance. A maintenance contract for these is an effective way to insure your ability to print on demand and for your costs to be predictable. This is particularly true if your firm shares larger and faster printers, instead of having smaller individual printers in each person's office.

Support for servers: Unlike desktop PCs, it is typically not cost effective to purchase one or more extra servers to have on-hand in case of emergency. And since servers are the most difficult and time-consuming to restore after a loss, you need to plan thoroughly and carefully how to get your servers up and running after an interruption. If you have a support contract for your server, manufacturers can usually replace the hardware by the next day. However, that may only be the beginning of the recovery project. New services are

available that provide varying degrees of coverage to get you back up and running far sooner than with traditional methods.

Server Recovery: A number of providers now offer a recovery system with two components. The first is an on-site server dedicated to backing up your server(s). The second is an off-site storage facility. All files on the backup server are encrypted and then synchronized with the off-site storage facility. In case of disaster, an entire replacement backup server can be shipped with a complete copy of your server(s) to your office or to your recovery site for restoring stand-by or replacement server(s), even if the hardware is different than your original server(s).

Paid Support From Consultants

There is an active community of independent consultants that service law firms, and the products used in law firms. The advantage of working with firms that have experience specifically with law firms is that they are more likely to have handled the technology goals that you have set for your firm. Although it is helpful to work with consultants that are in your geographical area and can come to your office, the easy and convenient remote access techniques available today allow you to seek expertise from a wide geographical area. Pricing for independent consultants varies based on the city, the products, specialization, and the degree of experience, and can range from \$75 per hour to over \$200 per hour. Some consultants charge by the hour, and some offer variations including project pricing, flat monthly retainers, and discounts for blocks of pre-purchased consulting hours.

Tech Support For The Network

Network components: There are usually very few networking components in your installation if you exclude the stations and the server. These components include wiring, wired and wireless routers and switches, software and/or hardware firewalls, and print servers. In most cases, your firm will seek tech support for these elements of your network from independent consultants, or the staff within your firm. This will depend on the size of your firm, and the technical expertise within your firm. From a long run cost perspective, the money spent on engaging an experienced consultant to initially set up your network properly can save you

money and time during the ongoing use of the system. Except in specific troubleshooting circumstances, the manufacturers of these components are not going to be an effective overall source of tech support because it is the interaction of these parts, more so than any single part, that will dictate the success of the system.

Network updates and changes: Another area of tech support for your network will be adding or removing users and keeping the updates of the components from the manufacturers up to date. The way that this is handled will depend on the size of your firm, but is often a combination of written procedures along with occasional visits from your independent network consultant.

Tech Support Challenges With Integrated Software

Most firms are, and should be, interested in minimizing the administration of their business. In the effort to further this goal some users are attracted to the idea that some of their software programs can link together. Examples of this include Timeslips and Amicus Attorney, or Time Matters and Juris; or a wide variety of programs that integrate or link with Microsoft Outlook. These links and integrations can be effective and helpful, however, if you have a problem from a tech support point of view, your firm may be faced with a finger-pointing environment because each manufacturer may tell you that the problem is with the other company's product. So, although this shouldn't stop you from considering integration among different products, you should also consider getting feedback about the integrations, as well as considering products that fill your needs without using links or integration.

Centralizing Your Tech Support Information

A plethora of configuration data is required to support your investment in IT. These include logins, passwords, and network addresses, etc. When this information is properly organized and readily accessible by those who need it, the time required to resolve problems can be shortened. Security is also tighter when passwords are updated regularly. When using independent tech support, you should insure that you have access to this information and audit it routinely (consider reviewing it twice yearly). Beyond the obvious information required to directly support your desktop PCs, network, and

tech support

files, also consider the information required for e-mail, Web sites, software subscriptions such as anti-virus protection, and Internet access services.

Measuring the success of the tech support

The responsiveness and effectiveness of support, both in-house and out-sourced, can be routinely evaluated objectively to determine how well the firm's needs are being met. One of the best tools for this is a ticketing system, usually maintained by the support provider, for tracking work done, whether in response to a request by you or your staff, or to a system or network event being monitored. Monthly or quarterly reports can show everyone involved what the issues and costs really are, and what adjustments may need to be made.

In Sum

The effective use of tech support for your IT environment will help your firm keep costs down, and will allow the users of your systems to be productive. Your firm should consider the tech support requirements for

both hardware and software. Identifying who will provide your tech support (software publishers, hardware manufacturers, independent consultants, or internal staff) is important, as well as documenting the information necessary for your tech support people.*

Neil Quateman is the founder of *Beyond Management LLC* in Los Angeles, California. The firm provides software support and training for law firms. Neil is a former voting member, and is currently serving as a special advisor on the executive committee of the Law Practice Management and Technology section of the State Bar of California. He can be reached at nquateman@beyondm.com.

Dan Henrickson is an independent office network consultant in West Los Angeles, California. He has worked extensively with medium and smaller law offices since 1992, focusing on maintaining high availability for systems and data, and configuring software and systems to optimize productivity for attorneys and staff. He can be reached at dan@henrickson.net.

* This article is soon to be published in the State Bar Publication *Opening A Law Office*.