THE IT BUYER'S GUIDE

What To Ask
Before You Sign

CinchOps
Technological Solutions

Helping Small and Medium Sized Businesses
in the Greater Houston Area
Make Smarter IT Decisions

Table of contents

03
What you'll gain from this guide

04
What kind of IT support does your business need?

06
What does good IT support include?

07
How IT providers charge

08
How to compare IT proposals

10
Where extra costs and gaps can hide

12
Cybersecurity: What should you expect from your provider?

14
Backup and recovery: Don't stop at "Yes, we back up your data"

16
Questions to ask before you sign or renew

19
IT provider comparison worksheet

20
What comes next

What you'll gain from this guide

At CinchOps we work with small and midsize businesses throughout Greater Houston Area, and we've seen how difficult it can be to compare IT providers when services, pricing and agreements vary so much from one company to the next.

Services that sound similar may cover very different things, and the lowest price doesn't always tell you what you'll ultimately pay or what kind of support you'll receive. We created this guide to help you understand those differences and make a more informed decision.

BY THE END, YOU'LL HAVE:

- A clear understanding of the most common IT service models and which one may fit your business.
- A better way to compare proposals without letting price drive the entire decision.
- A sense of where extra fees, contract gaps and cybersecurity exclusions can show up.
- The key questions to ask before choosing a provider and what to look for in their answers.
- A clearer picture of what strong backup and disaster recovery should include.



You don't need to become an IT expert to make a smart IT decision. You just need to know what to look for, what to ask and when an answer deserves a closer look.

What kind of IT support does your business need?

Before you start comparing IT providers, it helps to know the type of support you're shopping for. Not every business needs the same level of help, and not every IT company provides it the same way. Most outside IT support falls into three general models.

Break-fix or hourly support

With break-fix support, you call an IT company when you need help and pay for the time it takes to address the problem. You may also hire them for one-time projects, such as equipment setup or upgrades.

The appeal is simple: When you don't need help, you don't pay for ongoing support.

This model can make sense for very small businesses with simple technology needs and few support requests. But paying only when something goes wrong doesn't necessarily mean paying less overall.

A recurring issue, several support calls in a short period or one major problem can quickly add up. Also, because the focus is typically on fixing the immediate issue, there is often less ongoing attention given to preventing the next one.

That can make IT costs harder to predict and, for businesses that need frequent support, **potentially more expensive over time.**

Managed IT services

With managed IT services, you pay an **ongoing monthly fee** for an agreed-upon set of services. Instead of calling an IT company only when something breaks and you're in the throes of downtime, you have a provider regularly supporting and managing your technology.

Depending on the agreement, that might include helping employees with everyday IT issues, maintaining computers and systems, managing cybersecurity protections, overseeing backups and planning for future technology needs.

This model is often a better fit for businesses that rely heavily on technology, have multiple employees to support or want someone to keep an eye on IT rather than waiting for problems to surface.

The important phrase here is "depending on the agreement." Managed IT services can vary considerably from one provider to another, so **a monthly fee alone doesn't tell you how much support you're getting.**

Vendor-supplied IT support

Many software and technology vendors provide support for their own products. If you have a problem with a specific application, for example, its vendor may have a help desk that can assist you.

That support can be valuable, but their responsibility usually ends with their product. If the problem involves another application, your computer, your network or something else in your IT environment, you may need someone else to resolve it.

For most businesses, vendor support works best as one piece of their overall IT support rather than a replacement for it.

Which model is right for you?

There isn't one answer for every business. Think about how dependent your team is on technology, how much downtime affects your work and customers, how often employees need help and how much responsibility you want to manage internally.

Most importantly, make sure you understand what the provider will be responsible for and what will still be your responsibility. The name of the service model matters far less than knowing what you're getting.

Red Flag

You hear from your IT provider only when something breaks, even though you're paying for ongoing support.



What does good IT support include?

Good IT support makes technology easier to run, easier to plan for and less likely to disrupt your business. That takes more than having someone to call when an employee can't log in or the Wi-Fi stops working.

A strong IT provider should help you in several key areas

Responsive day-to-day support
When employees run into a problem, they should know where to go for help and be able to get it without spending half the day chasing down a response.

Ongoing maintenance
Computers, systems and software need regular attention to stay reliable, secure and up to date. Your provider should take care of that work without waiting for you to point out a problem.

Cybersecurity
Your provider should help protect your systems and data, keep those protections current and monitor for potential weaknesses before they become bigger problems.

Backup and recovery
Good support goes beyond making copies of your data. Your provider should have a plan for recovering important systems and information, and be testing that recovery process regularly.

Help with your other technology vendors
When a problem involves your internet provider, software company, phone system or another technology vendor, your IT provider should help coordinate the resolution rather than leaving you stuck in the middle.

Clear documentation
Your business should have visibility into important information about its technology, including equipment, software, accounts and systems. That information shouldn't live solely with your IT provider.

Planning for what's ahead
Your provider should be talking with you about aging equipment, upcoming projects, changing business needs and future IT costs so you have time to plan and budget.

You may see these services packaged differently from one provider to another, but the bigger question is whether your IT support covers the business **today while also helping you prepare for the future**.

If the relationship is largely about fixing problems after they happen, you're getting technical help, not the full value that good IT support provides.

How IT providers charge

There's no standard price for IT support. Two businesses of similar size can pay very different amounts depending on what they need and what their provider is responsible for. That can make IT pricing difficult to compare at first. Understanding what goes into the price can help you make sense of the numbers.

What affects the price?

An IT provider may consider several factors when putting together your price, including:

1. The number of employees who need support

2. The number of computers, devices and locations being managed

3. The level of cybersecurity and backup support included

4. The complexity of your technology

5. The amount and type of support included in the agreement

6. Any additional services your business requires

Some providers bundle most of these services into one monthly fee. Others separate certain services or charge for them as needed. The way that monthly fee is calculated can vary, too. One provider may base its price on the number of employees it supports, while another may use devices, locations, a set amount of support time or a combination of factors.

That means two monthly quotes may be built very differently, even when the services sound similar. Ask what the price is based on and what could cause it to change as your business grows or your needs change.

Ongoing support vs. projects

Your regular IT support fee may not cover larger projects. An office move, major upgrade, new system or other significant technology changes may be quoted separately.

For project work, ask for a clear scope that explains what will be completed, what the price includes and what could result in additional charges. You should understand the full scope before the work begins, not when the invoice arrives.

Predictability matters, too

The monthly price matters, but so does how predictable that price will be.

Ask what's included in the regular fee, what's billed separately and what kinds of situations could increase your costs.

A quote that looks lower at first can become more expensive if services you need regularly are charged separately.

The goal isn't simply to find the lowest number. It's to understand what that number represents and what you should expect to pay beyond it.

That becomes especially important when you start comparing proposals.

How to compare IT proposals

You have two IT proposals sitting in front of you. One is priced lower. Is it the better deal? Maybe. Before you decide, make sure you're comparing the same level of service.

IT proposals can look similar on the surface while covering very different things. A provider may include services in its monthly fee that another bills separately. Some may take responsibility for areas that others leave to you. Even familiar terms like “IT support” can mean something different from one agreement to the next.

Start by putting the price aside and comparing these areas:

What’s included

Look at the actual services covered by each proposal. Pay particular attention to the areas your business will rely on regularly, such as employee support, cybersecurity, backups and ongoing maintenance.

If one proposal includes something the other doesn't, find out what it would cost to add it before comparing the totals.

What’s not included

Exclusions can be just as important as what's included. Look for services that require an additional fee, such as onsite visits, after-hours support, projects or help working with another technology vendor.

Don't assume something is covered because it seems like it should be.

What happens when you need help

Compare how each provider handles support. How do employees ask for help? Are response expectations clearly defined? What happens when an issue is urgent or occurs outside normal business hours?

A proposal should give you a clear enough picture that you know what to expect before the first problem occurs.



Look at the whole proposal, not just the total

Once you've compared the scope, exclusions and responsibilities, go back to the price.

You may find that the lower quote really is the better value. Or you may discover that you're comparing two very different levels of support.

Who handles what

Pay attention to where the provider's responsibility ends. If there's a problem involving your internet provider, business software or another technology vendor, will your IT provider help manage it? If you need a larger technology project completed, is that part of the agreement or separate?

The fewer gray areas there are, the easier it will be to know who to call when something goes wrong.

A good proposal should make it easy to understand what you're paying for, what the provider is responsible for and what will cost you extra. If you can't answer those questions after reading it, insist on clarification before you sign.



Red Flag

One proposal costs significantly less, but you can't clearly identify what's different about the service you're getting.

Where extra costs and gaps can hide

A low monthly price can be hard to resist. Just make sure it's telling you the whole story. Some IT providers keep their advertised or quoted price lower by excluding certain services from the agreement or charging separately for things you expect to be included. Those details aren't always obvious. They may be tucked into the fine print, described vaguely or simply not called out unless you ask.

That's why it's important to look beyond the monthly number and understand where extra costs and coverage gaps commonly show up.

Onsite and after-hours support

What happens when a problem can't be fixed remotely? Or when something goes wrong outside of normal business hours?

Some providers include onsite visits and after-hours support, while others charge separately for them. Find out how both are handled and what you'll pay if you need them.

Projects and major changes

Your monthly agreement may cover ongoing support without covering larger projects. Office moves, major upgrades, new systems and other significant changes may be quoted separately. Ask what your provider considers a "project" so you know where regular support ends and additional charges begin.

Help with other vendors

Technology problems don't always stay neatly in one lane. Your internet connection, business software, phone system or another vendor may be involved in an issue.

Find out whether your IT provider will work with those vendors on your behalf and whether that help is included. Otherwise, you could end up paying extra or spending your own time figuring out who is responsible.

Cybersecurity

Don't assume every security service is automatically part of an IT agreement. Look closely at what cybersecurity support is included, what requires an additional service or fee, and whether there are protections your business is expected to purchase or manage separately.

Backup and recovery

"Backup included" can sound reassuring, but those two words don't tell you very much.

Find out what information and systems are covered, what happens when data needs to be recovered and whether recovery itself is included in the agreement.

Planning and account management

Ongoing technology planning may also vary by provider. Some agreements include regular conversations about upcoming needs, equipment replacement, projects and budgets. Others may focus primarily on day-to-day support.

If you expect your provider to help you plan ahead, make sure that responsibility is reflected in the service you're buying.

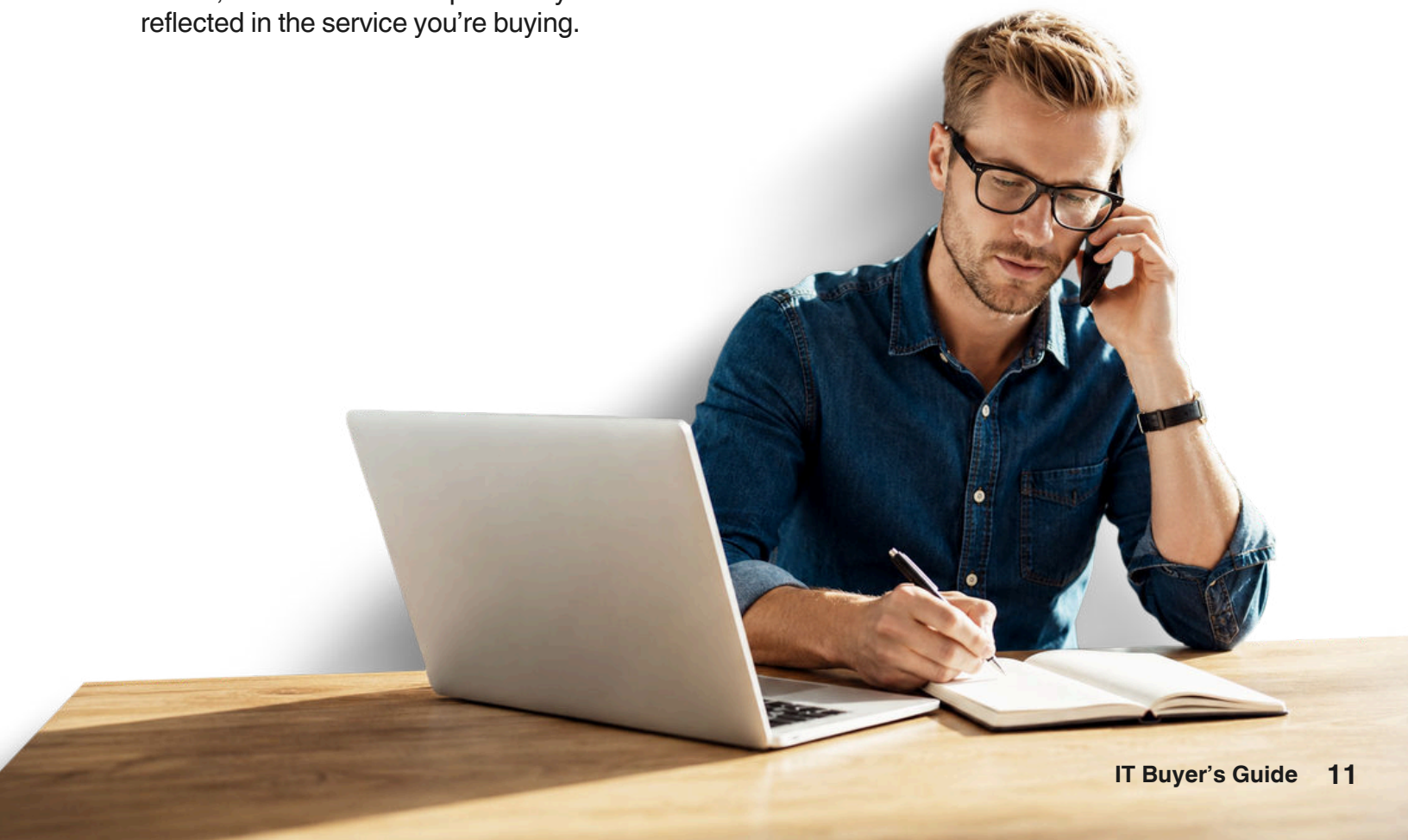
Read past the price

Not every additional fee is a problem. Some services reasonably fall outside an ongoing IT agreement.

What you want to avoid are surprises. Before you sign, ask the provider to walk you through the exclusions, limitations and additional charges in the agreement. If something you expected to be included isn't there, find out what it would cost to add it. A provider should be willing to make those answers clear before you become a client, not after the bill arrives.

Red Flag

The price looks great, but the provider can't clearly explain what isn't included or what would result in an additional charge.



Cybersecurity: What should you expect from your provider?

You shouldn't need to become a cybersecurity expert to know whether your business is being properly protected. But you should know what your IT provider is responsible for, what protections are in place and how they're being maintained. A good provider should be able to explain all that in language you understand.



More than basic protection

Cybersecurity isn't something you set up once and forget about.

New threats emerge, employees come and go, software changes and your business adds new technology.

Your provider should be regularly maintaining and reviewing your protections rather than assuming that whatever was put in place a year or two ago is still enough today.

Clear responsibilities

One of the most important questions you can ask is simply: **Who is responsible for what?**

Your IT provider may manage many parts of your cybersecurity, but your business will still have responsibilities of its own. Employees may need security training. Your team may need to follow certain processes when handling sensitive information. Some security services may also fall outside your standard IT agreement.

You should know where your provider's responsibility ends and yours begins.

Visibility into your security

You should never take “you’re protected” on faith. Never trust without verification.

Your provider should be able to tell you what they’re doing, identify areas that need attention and keep you informed when something changes. You don’t need a highly technical report. You need enough information to understand where your business stands and what, if anything, needs to happen next.

Your other requirements matter, too

Cybersecurity decisions don’t happen in a vacuum. Your business may have security requirements based on the type of information you handle, the industry you operate in or the terms of your cyber insurance policy.

Your IT provider should understand the requirements that affect your business and be able to help you determine whether your technology supports them.

Ask for an explanation you can understand

You don’t need to know the name of every security tool your provider uses.

You do need to feel confident that someone is paying attention, keeping protections current and letting you know when your business must take action.

If your provider can’t explain your cybersecurity in terms you understand, keep asking questions until they can.

Red Flag

When you ask how your business is being protected, you get a vague “we’ve got it covered” instead of a clear explanation.



Backup & recovery: Don’t stop at “Yes, we back up your data”

If you ask your IT provider whether your data is backed up, there’s a good chance the answer will be yes. That’s reassuring, but it doesn’t tell you whether those backups will get your business back up and running when you need them. Good backup and recovery support should answer a few bigger questions.

What is being backed up?

Start with the basics: What information is actually covered?

Important data can live in more places than you realize, including employee computers, shared files, email, cloud applications and the software your business relies on every day.

Ask your provider what is being backed up, how often and whether there is anything important that isn’t covered.

Are your backups protected?

A backup isn’t much help if the same event that damages your original data can damage the backup, too.

Your provider should be able to explain how your backup copies are protected from problems such as a cyberattack, accidental deletion or a system failure. You don’t need to understand the technology behind it. You need to know that losing the original won’t mean losing your backup along with it.

Has anyone tested the recovery?

This is one of the most important questions in this guide. A successful backup tells you that data was copied. A successful recovery test tells you that you can get it back.

Your provider should regularly test the recovery process rather than waiting for an emergency to find out whether it works.



How long would recovery take?

Getting your data back is one part of recovery. How long it takes matters, too. Ask what would happen if an important system became unavailable tomorrow.

What should be restored first? How long could your business reasonably expect to be without it? What would employees do in the meantime?

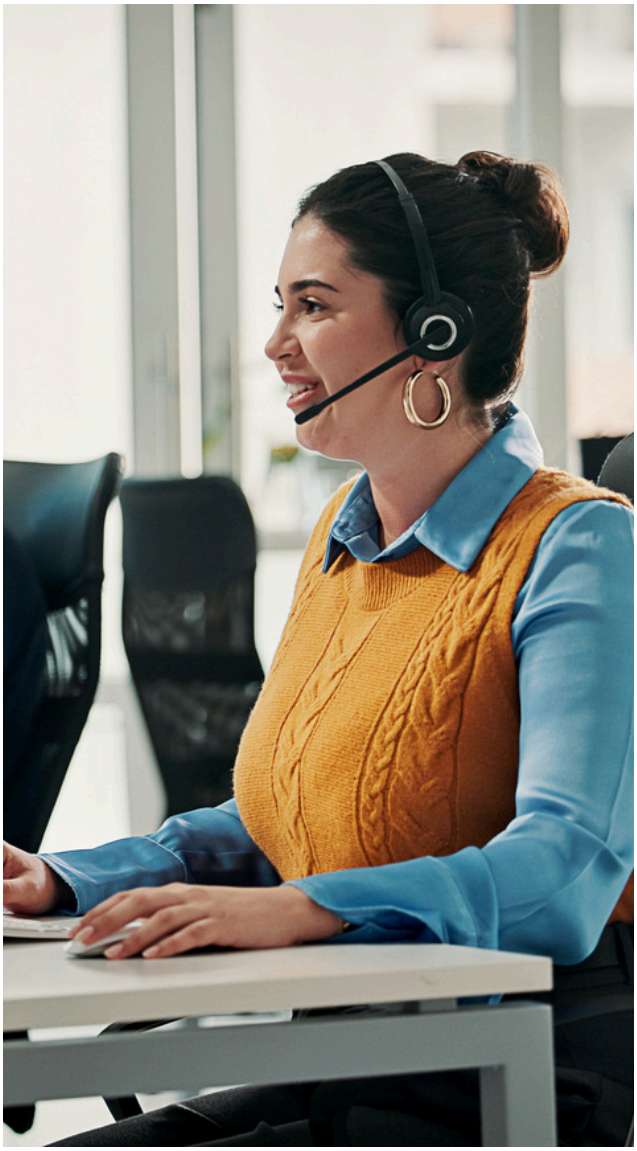
The answers may be different depending on what went down, but your provider should have thought through those scenarios before you're in the middle of one.

Is there a recovery plan?

When a serious disruption happens, you don't want the initial conversation about recovery to start after everything is already down.

Your provider should have a clear plan for the technology they're responsible for restoring, including what needs to happen first and who needs to be involved.

Backups give you a copy of your data. Recovery planning gives you a way back to work. Make sure your IT support includes both.



Red Flag

Your provider can tell you that your data is backed up but can't tell you when it was last successfully restored in a test.

Questions to ask before you sign or renew

You don't need to know the ins and outs of IT to ask the right questions. And you shouldn't be afraid to ask as many as you need to. Before you sign an agreement, renew one or decide if your current provider is still the right fit, get clear answers to these questions. If something is important to you, make sure the answer is reflected in writing.

1. When we need help, how do we get it and how quickly will someone respond?

Why this matters: Few things are more frustrating than having an IT problem bring work to a halt and then waiting around for someone to respond. Find out how employees request help, what happens when something is urgent and whether response expectations are clearly defined.

2. What exactly is included in our agreement and what will cost us extra?

Why this matters: Don't settle for "most things are covered." Ask about onsite visits, after-hours support, projects and anything else your business is likely to need. You want to know what could trigger another bill before that bill lands on your desk.

3. How will you help us plan for future IT needs and costs?

Why this matters: Your provider shouldn't be talking to you only when something breaks or needs to be replaced. Ask how often you'll discuss aging equipment, upcoming projects, business changes and your IT budget. There should be a plan for what's coming.

4. How will we know our technology is being properly maintained?

Why this matters: "We take care of it" isn't much of an answer. Your provider should be able to show you what it is maintaining, what has been done and what needs attention. You don't need a stack of technical reports. You do need visibility into the technology your business depends on.

5. How are you protecting our business from cyberthreats?

Why this matters: Pay attention to how clearly they answer this one. You shouldn't get buried in technical jargon or brushed off with "you're covered." They should be able to explain what protections are in place, what they are responsible for and what your business needs to do on its end.

6. Are there security, compliance or cyber insurance requirements we need to be thinking about?

Why this matters: The requirements for your business may depend on your industry, the information you handle and your insurance policy. Your provider should be asking about those things. If nobody has ever brought them up, find out why.

7. What is being backed up, and when was the last time you successfully tested our recovery?

Why this matters: This is one question where "yes" is not enough. Knowing that backups are running is very different from knowing your data can be recovered. Ask what is covered, how often it is backed up and when someone last proved that the recovery process works.

8. What happens if we have a major outage tomorrow?

Why this matters: Ask them to walk you through it. What gets restored first? Who does what? How will you communicate? How long could recovery take? A serious outage is a bad time to discover that nobody worked through those answers.

9. What information about our technology will we have access to?

Why this matters: Your business should have access to important information about its equipment, software, accounts and systems. Be very cautious about a provider that keeps you completely in the dark. It's your technology and your business shouldn't be dependent on one company holding all the keys.

10. What happens when the problem involves another technology vendor?

Why this matters: Eventually, someone is going to say the problem belongs to the internet provider, software company, phone provider or someone else. Find out whether your IT provider will help coordinate the resolution or leave your team bouncing between vendors trying to figure out whose problem it is.

11. Who will be supporting our business?

Why this matters: Find out who handles everyday requests, who you turn to when there's a bigger concern and who is keeping an eye on the overall relationship. Ask about the team's experience and whether support is provided by their own employees or another company. You should know who you're trusting with an important part of your business.

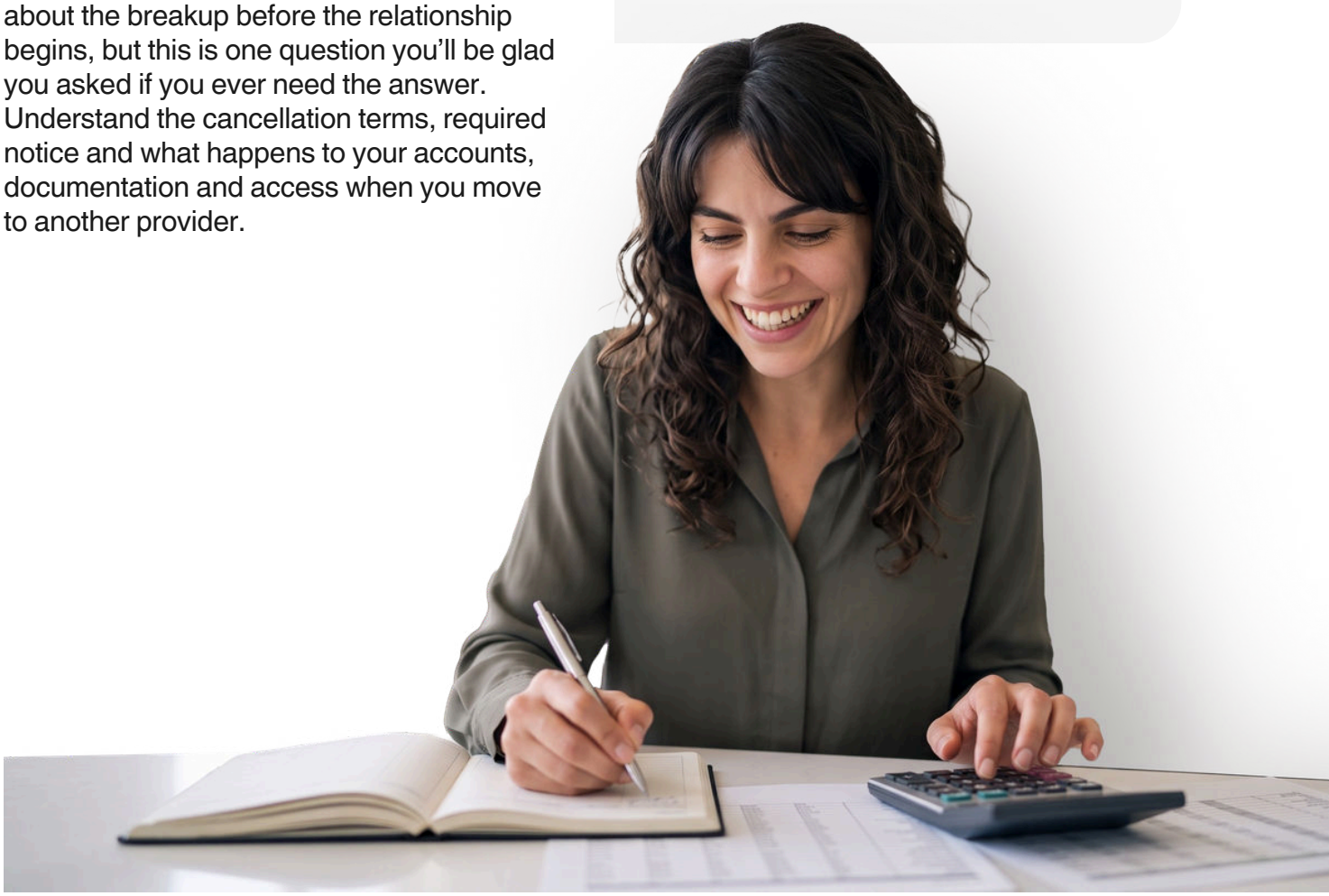
12. If this partnership isn't working, how do we leave?

Why this matters: Nobody likes talking about the breakup before the relationship begins, but this is one question you'll be glad you asked if you ever need the answer. Understand the cancellation terms, required notice and what happens to your accounts, documentation and access when you move to another provider.

Read it. Ask questions about anything you don't understand. If something you were promised isn't there, ask for it to be added or clarified before you sign.

One last piece of advice: Get it in writing

If the answer matters to your decision, don't rely on a handshake or a great sales conversation. Response expectations, included services, additional fees, contract terms and other important commitments should be clear in the agreement you sign.



IT provider comparison worksheet

Use this worksheet to compare up to three IT providers side by side. Look beyond the monthly price to see what each provider includes, what costs extra and where the biggest differences are.

What to compare	Provider 1	Provider 2	CinchOPs
After-hours support included	○ Yes ○ No	○ Yes ○ No	**Yes**
Onsite support included	○ Yes ○ No	○ Yes ○ No	**Yes**
Recovery regularly tested	○ Yes ○ No	○ Yes ○ No	**Yes**
Defined response expectations	○ Yes ○ No	○ Yes ○ No	**Yes**
Technology planning included	○ Yes ○ No	○ Yes ○ No	**Yes**
Vendor coordination included	○ Yes ○ No	○ Yes ○ No	**Yes**
Additional fees clearly defined	○ Yes ○ No	○ Yes ○ No	**Yes**
Cancellation terms clear	○ Yes ○ No	○ Yes ○ No	**Yes**
Monthly cost	**$** _____	**$** _____	**$100 - $250 Per Endpoint**



What comes next

Now that you know what to look for, take a closer look at the IT support you have today. A second opinion can help you understand what's working well and where there may be room for improvement.

SCHEDULE A FREE IT CONSULTATION

At CinchOps, we help small and midsize businesses throughout the Greater Houston Area get more from their technology and IT support.

During your complimentary consultation, we'll take a fresh look at your current technology and IT support to help identify:

- Recurring problems that may not be getting resolved at the source
- Cybersecurity gaps that deserve attention
- Whether your backups are ready when you need them
- Areas where your current IT support may be falling short

There's no obligation to switch providers. If everything looks good, you'll have added confidence in the support you already have. If we find something that needs attention, you'll know exactly where to start.



Why work with CinchOps?

CinchOps is a managed IT services provider based in Katy, Texas, serving small and mid-sized businesses across the Houston metro. Our approach is built around a named engineer who knows your network.

Zero-Zero-Zero terms

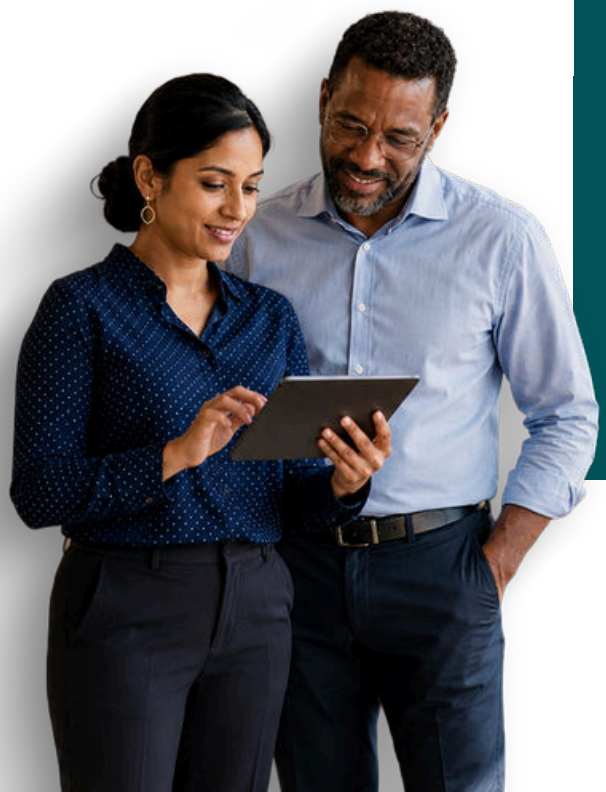
No long-term contracts, no hidden fees and no cancellation penalties, backed by a 30-day satisfaction guarantee.

Fast, personal support

Help desk requests are answered in under 15 minutes by an engineer who already knows your systems.

Flat, predictable pricing

One flat monthly rate of $100 to $250 per user, so your IT bill no longer depends on what broke this month.



What our clients say

“

As opposed to most MSP's, CinchOps does what they say they are going to do, with the expertise that you need. Shane and his group have a long-standing relationship with vendors, and have a deep understanding of the many needs of the business. You can trust CinchOps.

Shawn Eicholz

“

CinchOps has been an outstanding partner for our business. Their managed IT services are reliable and tailored to our needs, and their team is always responsive and professional.

Amy Wallace

Ready to see how your current IT support stacks up?

Schedule your complimentary IT consultation today.

281-269-6506
cinchops.com
info@cinchops.com