Straight Talk from the Corner Office

5 'Must-haves' When Choosing a Trusted Support Partner

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Welcome again to "Straight Talk", one of the ways Coranet shares perspectives on important issues and opportunities in business communications. In our last spotlight, we looked at the major changes taking place in communications technology, together with the different support options that business leaders have to help ensure peak performance and a strong return on their technology investment. For this Spring spotlight, we'll continue that discussion by sharing some recent decision-maker research on what makes for a superior support relationship vs. one that falls short of the mark.

The Importance of the Technology Support Decision

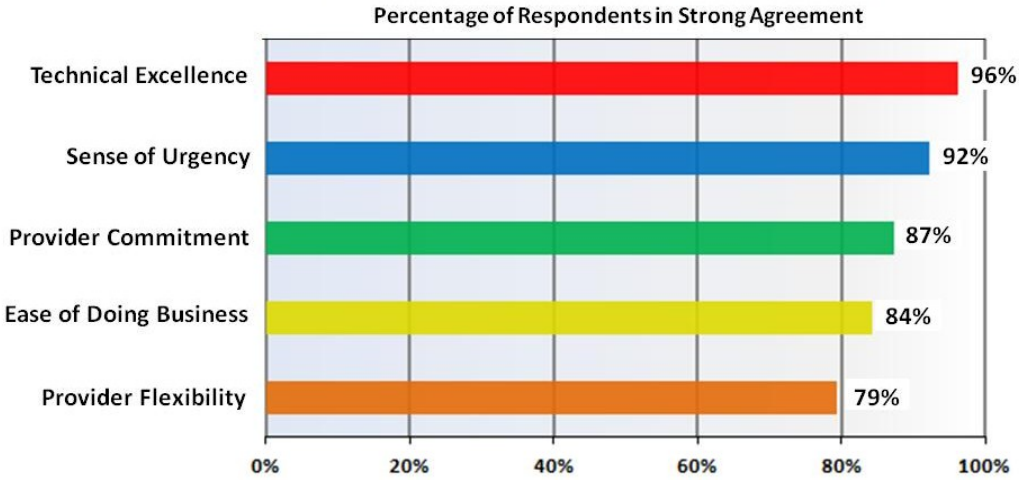
As a quick recap from our last Straight Talk, the communications technology that is readily available to companies of all sizes has never been more effective in contributing to business value -- whether in boosting the productivity of individual employees and teams, or in providing an unprecedented 'anytime, anywhere' ability to stay in close touch with customers and partners. As a result of these gains, communications technology is increasingly being viewed by business leaders as a strategic asset that can play a strong role in helping a company gain *and maintain* a competitive edge in the marketplace.

Although powerful, this new technology is inherently complex and often challenging for even the most skilled internal IT team to administer and manage. If your company has decided to supplement in-house IT capabilities with technical support delivered by an outside provider, there are several factors to keep in mind that will help ensure that you wind up with a highly competent and trusted partner. For companies that already have an existing provider or choose to provide support internally, these same factors can be used as a report card.

The Key Drivers for a Superior Support Relationship

In the summer of 2012, technology research firm *IntelliCom Analytics* conducted a study on the decision factors associated with selecting an external support provider. Combining a national survey with in-depth interviews, IntelliCom probed the perspectives of technology decision makers as to which provider selection factors are the strongest predictors of a successful external support relationship.

"What are the Top 5 'Must Haves' When Selecting an External Support Provider?"



The IntelliCom study closely mirrors the feedback we have received from our own customers. Let's take a closer look at the findings to better understand the decision maker thinking behind each factor.

Must Have #1

Technical Excellence

It's not surprising that this attribute scored highest among technology leaders, since it goes to the very heart of why an external provider was sought out in the first place. Why go outside for support unless the provider has mastery of your specific technologies?

Rather than being a single attribute, IntelliCom found in their 1-on-1 interviews that most decision makers view technical excellence as the sum of several contributing competencies:

- Technological Scope -- here, the provider has comprehensive skills that can address -- either directly or through partners -- the full breadth of business communications technology that the company utilizes.
- Cradle-to-Grave Capability -- the preferred partner is able to provide support across the entire technology lifecycle -- from upfront guidance on technology strategy and solution selection, straight through to post-implementation maintenance and management.
- Multi-Vendor Skills -- since businesses are increasingly using communication platforms and applications from multiple vendors, providers with this competency have the expertise to support mixed technology environments.

Must Have #2

Sense of Urgency

This attribute is all about the provider acting as if the customer's business is as important as their own. Key to the demonstration of urgency is rapid, responsive and effective support when the customer is in need. This keen sense of importance needs to be evidenced in all ways that support is provided, whether through remote technical support or on-site intervention.

Must Have #3

Provider Commitment

It was clear from the IntelliCom research that the providers held in the highest regard all demonstrated a clear and unwavering commitment to their customer's business success. This typically took several forms; most frequently in 'having shared skin in the game' by offering customer-specific performance commitments in the form of service level agreements (SLAs) with 'teeth'. Another hallmark of commitment is seen when the provider invests the time to understand and stay current with the customer's business strategy and market challenges.

Must Have #4

Ease of Doing Business

Although the specifics of this attribute varied widely across the different decision makers, it was always characterized as 'I know it when I have it'. Several examples of 'ease' were frequently cited:

- The provider is always reachable, with someone in authority being readily accessible.
- An open and proactive communications style, with frequent statusing to the customer during trouble resolution.
- The willingness of the provider to assume 'the buck stops here' ownership during trouble shooting compared to the all-too-common 'pointing of the finger'. A superior provider will remain engaged until the customer problem is resolved, even if the root cause is traced to another supplier.
- Providing a straightforward support approach with easy to understand pricing and 'no surprises'.

Must Have #5

Provider Flexibility

For most of the decision makers, the hallmark of flexibility was the willingness of the provider to tailor its support to meet the specific needs of the customer. In contrast to rigid, fixed scope support, the flexible provider will readily customize its offerings to meet the shared-responsibility model that the customer has adopted -- whether full outsourcing or selective out-tasking in an active partnership with the customer's IT staff. Flexibility can be also seen in the provider readily engaging in knowledge transfer with the customer's IT team, as well as in the willingness to assume an agency role with single point of accountability over other 3rd party suppliers that the customer may be using.

Final Thoughts

The plain truth is that all support providers are not created equal, and careful selection of your provider is likely to pay major dividends. If your company is similar to those that shared their perspectives in the research, using these '5 Must Haves' as guidelines can help you choose a provider that is truly a partner in your on-going success.

Thank you for joining me in this look at the key hallmarks of a superior support relationship. I welcome you sharing your reactions, questions and experiences, as well as suggestions for other topics you would like to see covered. If you have any questions, please reach us at questions@coranet.com. Please also visit coranet.com and past Straight Talk issues.

Margaret