

More Than Help Desks Tech support businesses offer corporate protection and strategy

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Tech support isn't just about resetting passwords and updating programs; it's about the future of computers, according to experts working in Greater Lansing and around the country.

"Today, you need a technology department just like you need an accounting department," said Jeff Dettloff, president of Providence Consulting in Lansing, Mich.

Providence Consulting has 75 companies as clients, most in a 60-mile radius around Lansing. They're in industries ranging from nonprofits and medical facilities to government lobbying. His company's work is about half repair, such as updating software, and half prevention, such as protecting sensitive corporate data.

Dettloff compares technology support, or information technology (IT), to the role of a car mechanic. As the Internet started to grow in the 1990s, specialists were only called when something went wrong. But between ever-increasing security risks, networks of computers in an office linked together and streamlining processes in almost any industry, tech support teams look ahead to prepare businesses for future computer trends.

Mike Maddox, CEO of ASK in Lansing, said his business is about consulting, not about specific technology. ASK has several hundred clients throughout the U.S., Canada and Europe, and there are 54 staff members with the business itself "constantly expanding." About 98 percent of the work can be done remotely, leaving just a handful of on-site visits per year to manually repair devices.

"We're not in the business of selling hardware and software," Maddox said. "If you have bad procedures, better hardware will only make the bad procedures go faster."

Computer Support

While a large business with hundreds of employees can offer its own full-time tech support department, small companies with just a handful of staff need to find a third party to manage tech support.

Donald Lovell, president of Trouble Shooters Technical Support in Lansing, works with just one person: business partner David Hamilton. They target smaller businesses in the region including those in fields like construction and retail.

Many of their about 100 clients use proprietary software, created by third-party companies for the industry in

question. If there's a question on the software, callers usually contact that third-party company. For any other kind of problem, Lovell and Hamilton get the call.

"A lot of the time, the world has gone dark," Lovell said, referring to what problems look like on a client's end. "You can find how-to (fix something) on Google or YouTube. They're not paying me for the knowledge. They're paying me for getting it done a lot faster."

From Support to Security

There are several "levels" of tech support. The level where most new computer science graduates start is the help desk, answering the phone when callers have problems with passwords or installing new equipment. They also might manage a company's Wi-Fi so employees have Internet access, review new software for suitability with the company's existing system and push out software updates.

After a stint on the help desk, tech support staff looking for more advanced work often focus on a single aspect of computers. Some build systems, finding software and developing connections between computers that best perform the tasks the business needs.

Cybersecurity is such a specific aspect of computers, involving warnings about not opening questionable emails or clicking on unknown links. Tech support companies also offer security reviews: taking a close look at the vulnerabilities in a system, like employees with administrative privileges they shouldn't have or passwords too easy to guess.

"Businesses are way behind [on security]," Maddox said. "They need to have a comprehensive plan in place."

Cybersecurity is not only about cleaning viruses and preventing suspicious downloads. It's also about teaching users unfamiliar with computers about what they need to do to protect their networks, and why that protection is significant.

Lovell suggests three simple things any business can do to keep itself protected from hackers:

Make use of up-to-date antivirus software from companies like McAfee and Kaspersky. There is an up-front cost of about \$40 to \$60 per computer, but software can usually update automatically for free once installed.

Having a second copy of the company's most important data files, even if it's simply on a USB drive, means less time spent getting up to speed if information ends up lost. But users should make sure they save a copy of the data consistently — like before going home each night or even every Friday afternoon before business closes. Backups also need to be stored somewhere distinct — a USB is no good if it's still attached to a computer when it fails.

Use complex passwords. It can be a challenge to remember a dozen passwords for different programs, especially if they must be updated every three months. There are tools to help, like LastPass and KeePass, that store all your passwords on a secure site. One password releases your entire password list.

"People hate having to change their passwords all the time, but it's necessary for security," Maddox said.

Internet of Things

The "Internet of Things," also called the IoT, is the next step for businesses; that's when all your electronic equipment is connected digitally — think of using your phone to warm up your car or start your coffee pot.

Tools like the Amazon Echo and Google Home are early steps in the development of this connectivity. Experts now expect there will be between 20 and 30 billion devices — not counting phones, tablets and computers — connected via IoT networks by the year 2020.

Dettloff regularly talks with college students about innovative technologies, telling those interested in tech support to think beyond programming computers or fixing monitors.

“The future is the cloud, security, the Internet of Things and mobility,” Dettloff said. “They need to look at a broader perspective.”

Since technology has become more accessible for everyone, it’s easy to take it for granted. Companies need to know that tech support isn’t just about fixing problems when they appear, but making sure a safety net is in place before a problem happens.

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