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IT infrastructure: A black art or manageable commodity?

History repeats itself

Hundred years ago, in the early 1900s, if you wanted electricity, you had to do it yourself. Businesses had to put a generator in their basement and employ specialists to take care of the whole installation. In America, major corporations had their own VP of Electricity¹.

During the late 1800s and in the early 1900s, electrification was fragmented and individualised. In 1900, London was characterised by different currents, voltages and wiring systems that created confusion and hampered progress. Early generators produced direct current, which could only serve a small area because of unacceptable power losses over long distances. So each town area, factory or department store had its own steam-powered electricity generator. Early electric motors were custom built, installed and then monitored for problems and, therefore, competent engineers who could install and maintain a whole system for lighting and power were the critical resource of these times.

Today, you only call an electrician when you have a problem. Electricity is now a commodity governed by a set of standards that enable easy distribution and interoperability between different lighting systems, motor-powered devices and other appliances.

The same evolution is happening with Information Technology (IT). Its main infrastructure - hardware and system software – is already a commodity. Major vendors use standard hardware and software components and test mutual interoperability, as well as compliance with official and de facto standards.

Other analogy:
For your motorcar,
do you still need a
chauffeur able to
fix breakdowns?

So, why couldn't your IT infrastructure be as reliable as your electricity supply? Why do we still think of IT technicians as modern magicians? Why do IT breakdowns, software crashes, computer viruses and other problems continue to disrupt our business and make us miss critical deadlines?

¹ "Electrifying America, Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940" – David E. Nye, The MIT Press, 1990. This book offers a fascinating description of how electricity revolutionised lighting, transportation and power in homes, streets, stores, factories and farms.

Sourcing IT systems and support

As outlined above, hardware and system software are now commodities, despite the fact they are becoming increasingly complex. If built from standard components from reputed vendors, most of today's IT infrastructure works well, as long as it is properly tuned and maintained. Companies of all sizes and within all industries realise that, to differentiate themselves from their competitors, they have to be better at developing or using IT applications, rather than worrying about the infrastructure.

Some large corporations have pushed this reasoning to the ultimate, and completely outsourced² all their IT to external organisations (e.g. the Prudential Insurance Company has put IBM Global Services in charge of all its data centres and of their support).

Also, though IT power is not yet widely available from a socket, like electricity, several vendors are working hard to make this vision a reality. Examples include IBM's work on On Demand Business and Grid Computing Architecture; Salesforce.com offering of sales force automation applications from their website; and other similar forms of application service provision (ASP) where users can access the applications and their own data through a web browser. ASP - the provision of a software application hosted by a third party in a remote location over the Internet - has some advantages (e.g. scalability; pricing based on the actual use of the application; no capital expenditure) but also some drawbacks (e.g. no customisation; risk of poor performance over the internet; security and confidentiality). So, ASP is not a universal panacea.

Small companies could, in theory, benefit from all these forms of IT outsourcing, but they face practical issues that are not trivial. For example, a 'simple web browser' requires the set-up of a PC and support and maintenance. Most SMEs also need to maintain a set of 'legacy' applications and to manage a network connecting in-house computers on a local area network (LAN) with the outside world for e-mail, web access and so on. Finally, there are outsourcing-related concerns such as the apparent loss of control, the quality of service, and security and confidentiality issues.

Specific SME challenges

In retrospect, the computerisation of SMEs happened very quickly. Thirty years ago, in the 1970s, the 'high-tech' devices in small businesses were typewriters, calculators, photocopiers, plain old wired telephones and, in some cases, a telex machine with a paper-tape reader/punch.

Today the situation is quite different. A typewriter is an oddity. Personal computers, printers, fax machines, office networks, Internet connections and mobile phones have found their place everywhere. In 2003, 83% of SMEs in the UK were using e-mail and 58% had their own website (source: NatWest) and the numbers are growing all the time.

This rapid evolution has created two major problems: IT cost control and access to experienced personnel. Most small companies can't afford a complete IT team with the skills and capacity to handle the hardware and system software infrastructure, the telecommunications links, the system security and all the applications. In addition, top IT technicians are reluctant to work for small organisations where the career growth paths are limited and where the salaries are usually lower than in larger enterprises.

Consequently, a growing proportion of small businesses choose to look outside for a solution to their IT challenges. Why struggle with all the problems associated with an in-house IT specialist (stressing work periods followed by boring times and unchallenging routine; no support during holiday and sick leave; limited career opportunities; technology-based rather than service-focused IT recommendations; fixed salary costs and so on)?

² Note that outsourcing is not a new fad. Many companies, large and small, have been outsourcing payroll for a long time. And many SMEs rely on external partners to manage functions that don't require a full-time employee, such as HR and accounting.

Do you have an in-house electricity support team?

In contrast, businesses that turn to an external support organisation benefit from a complete team that

- Helps them understand the latest technologies and make the right IT decisions
- Manages their IT systems, desktops, network, servers, telecom connections and the application software
- Deals with virus protection, backup, disaster recovery and other security aspects
- Offers the best specialist to solve problems quickly, though the optimal method via telephone, remote maintenance or on-the-spot intervention
- Trains their users
- Has tools to constantly monitor the whole system to solve problems before they occur

In addition - compared with a employer-employee relationship - the client-supplier contract brings SMEs better service, accountability and value. It works better and it costs less.

An irreversible trend

The main IT issues are the same for large enterprises as for SMEs. A survey performed by ImageTrack in the UK in 2004 and published by Computing on the 16th September 2004 lists the following top ten issues:

1. Systems and information security
2. Cost and budget management
3. IT interaction with business
4. Business continuity
5. Software licensing
6. Keeping abreast of changes in technology
7. Compliance with legislation/regulations
8. Integration/consolidation of services
9. Mobile working
10. IT staff management and retention

For SMEs, most of these challenges are clearly easier to face with the help of a team of highly trained specialists that complement in-house IT resources or take over the management of the whole IT infrastructure.

That's why an increasing number of small businesses adopt IT support outsourcing. In a nutshell, IT support outsourcing brings them the following benefits:

- cost reduction
- improved service delivery
- cost predictability
- improved business performance
- improved process management

A quick calculation of the combined costs reductions and productivity improvements usually demonstrate that the return on investments is rapid. An IT support outsourcing contract pays for itself many times over in a three-year period.

The SupportPlan proposition

For all the IT issues listed on the previous page, SupportPlan has answers relevant to SMEs and departments within larger organisations. In a nutshell, our proposition is to make your IT work better and, in many cases, at a lower cost than what you spend today.



SupportPlan was founded in 1991 to offer the best IT support outsourcing in London. Since then, we have served over 1000 customers and never missed a deadline. Unlike many IT companies for whom support is just an add-on, our organisation is entirely dedicated to service. We are a leader in Mac–Windows cross-platform integration and we make Windows-only, Mac-only or mixed systems reliable, stable and secure. We constantly improve our tools and systems to deliver all the benefits mentioned above.

IT-related issues: the SupportPlan answers

Here are examples of how we address the main IT issues for SMEs (as per the list on the previous page):

1. Systems and information security

Problem - Viruses can halt your IT systems and destroy critical data. Intruders can steal confidential information, trade secrets, or create havoc.

Solution - We properly configure, tune and maintain detection and protection software that is part of the systems tested and delivered by reputable vendors. We also propose and install additional protection when necessary. See also point 4.

2. Cost and budget management

Problem – Most small companies can't afford a complete IT team with the skills and capacity to handle the hardware and system software infrastructure, the telecommunications links, the system security and all the applications. See also point 10.

Solution - Different organisations have different needs. That's why we offer a wide range of support options to our customers. We also strive to adapt our prices to stringent budgets: our prices start at £40 per month for systems with up to 40 workstations.

3. IT interaction with business

Problem - IT technologies are means to an end—to meet your business objectives and improve its performance. To differentiate yourself from your competitors, you have to be better with IT applications, rather than worrying about the IT infrastructure.

Solution - By outsourcing part or all of the management of your IT infrastructure, you let your staff focus on what makes a difference, on the things that bring business results. SupportPlan's mission is to complement your existing IT resource, so that it can meet the needs of key functions within your organisation.

4. Business continuity

Problem – Most businesses don't survive the loss of critical data such as accounting records, orders in process, customer information and so on. See also point 1.

Solution – First, we strive to solve problems before they occur. We minimise the risks of business disruption by software crashes, viruses and other problems through proven support technologies, methods and procedures including regular system reviews and proactive maintenance.

When you have problems, we are quick to react. Our tracking system shows that, on average, we solve between 55% and 75% of problems over the phone. Of the rest, we resolve 80% on the first visit, leaving only 5% to 9% of problems requiring a second visit.

We also offer backup and disaster recovery services that generally let you resume operation in a matter of hours after a disaster.

→ APPENDIX A

→ APPENDIX B

5. Software licensing

Problem – Many SMEs buy more software than they need because they don't understand and use all the capabilities of what they already have.

Solution – Our specialists are experts in their specific domains and they thoroughly understand how to best exploit, configure, tune and maintain system software and utilities from the top vendors. They maximise the use of such functions and, in many cases, they cut the requirements for additional software. This results in substantial savings.
6. Keeping abreast of changes in technology

Problem – Small companies that can't afford a Technical Director often miss opportunities to increase performance and/or to reduce costs with new technologies.

Solution - Our technicians and consultants stay at the forefront of IT support and technologies—that's their job. We also offer expertise-based services such as system design and integration, installation planning, and consulting. Our domains of expertise include servers, workstations, operating system and application software, networking, security, backup and disaster recovery, as well as special areas such as colour management and wireless networking.
7. Compliance with legislation/regulations

Problem – when you just rely on a limited number of support staff, compliance with new legislation and standards, in areas such as safety and privacy, will almost certainly get overlooked.

Solution – Our technicians and consultants keep abreast of such IT-related requirements and alert our customers in time when they need to comply with something new.
8. Integration/consolidation of services

Problem – Companies often end up with a variety of systems and applications that are scattered across the organisation, without any integration or robust procedures for security, maintenance and backup.

Solution – The SupportPlan team makes all your IT systems work smoothly together and manages regular, day-to-day maintenance and support as well as special one-off projects. This team includes PC specialists who use our Standard Platform support technologies to configure quasi-uninterruptible systems like those adopted by major investment banks in the City. This guarantees rigour and consistency, and the possibility to reconstruct systems exactly as they were before in case of major crashes.
9. Mobile working

Problem – To stay competitive, modern businesses need to let employees on the move (visiting customers, transporting goods, managing warehouses, working from home, etc.) access the company's IT resources over the Internet, without jeopardising security.

Solution – Our consulting services include special system design and implementation in all domains related to mobile working, including wireless access, web computing, networking and security.
10. IT staff management and retention

Problem – While a small staff of in-house IT specialists has obvious advantages, it also creates problems that are very important in small businesses because of the lack of 'critical mass' (e.g. stressing work periods followed by boring times and unchallenging routine; no support during holiday and sick leave; fixed salary costs and so on). In addition, top IT technicians are reluctant to work for small organisations where the career growth paths are limited and where the salaries are usually lower than in larger enterprises.

Solution – Outsourcing the management of your IT infrastructure to SupportPlan lets you focus your in-house resources on business applications rather than on technology. And in the end you benefit from cost predictability, improved ROI, and better service delivery and business performance.

→ APPENDIX C

More about SupportPlan

Currently, we serve over 120 clients including Abbey, the Institute of Directors, Conran Design Group, the Daily Mail Group Worldwide, Procter & Gamble, Sony-BMG, Estée Lauder and dozens of other organisations in design and publishing, creative and consulting services, corporate design, marketing communications, music and film, retail and leisure, charities and government.

→ APPENDIX D

We implement proven support technologies, methods and procedures. Our specially written call handling and tracking system helps us to ensure that we provide fast and effective support every time. An engineer answering a customer call has immediate access to that customer's system specifications and history to permit quick and pertinent action. This call-handling is also integrated with our accounting and administrative systems, providing seamless delivery of quality service, no matter who in the organisation is dealing with you.

Supporting people. And systems.

Our engineers and technicians have a technical expertise gained from years of experience and an extensive knowledge of hardware, software and compatibility issues. They also know that great service comes from people who really care. During over 10 years, we have earned the reputation as a partner that is open, ready to share knowledge and willing to go the extra mile to let customers focus on their business and stop worrying about their IT infrastructure.

CONTACT:

Park Place, Lawn Lane, London SW8 1UD

Tel. 020 7582 9999

Fax. 020 7582 8050

info@supportplan.com

www.supportplan.com

APPENDIX A

Standard Plans & Options - Overview

Different organisations have different needs. That’s why we offer a wide range of support options to our customers. We also strive to adapt our prices to stringent budgets: our prices start at £40 per month for systems with up to 40 workstations.

We are a leader in Mac–Windows cross-platform integration and we make Windows-only, Mac-only or mixed systems reliable, stable and secure. We also offer consulting services including special system design, installation planning, implementation, system upgrades and suitable support.

The three main support plans we offer are outlined in the table below.

Please call us at 020 7582 9999 to ask for a quotation that meets your exact requirements.

	pay as you go		fixed price
	flexible plan	proactive plan	premium plan
Unlimited telephone support for system and application software [9:00 - 12:30 -- 14:00 - 17:00]			
On-line support			
On-site support	charged on a T&M basis		included
	surcharge for 2-, 4-, 6- or 8-hour response	standard 8-hour response surcharge for 2-, 4-, or 6-hour response	
Parts & Labour	Charged on a T&M basis (no mark-up on parts)		included
Consulting Services	optional	50% discount on one day per year	
Four-stage SupportPlan Review	optional	included	
Proactive maintenance	optional	included	
Personally assigned support team Customer Service Rep and Principal Engineer	included		
Guaranteed loan system			included
Operating system support (on-site)			included
Higher-level reviews			optional
Comprehensive application software support (on-site)			optional

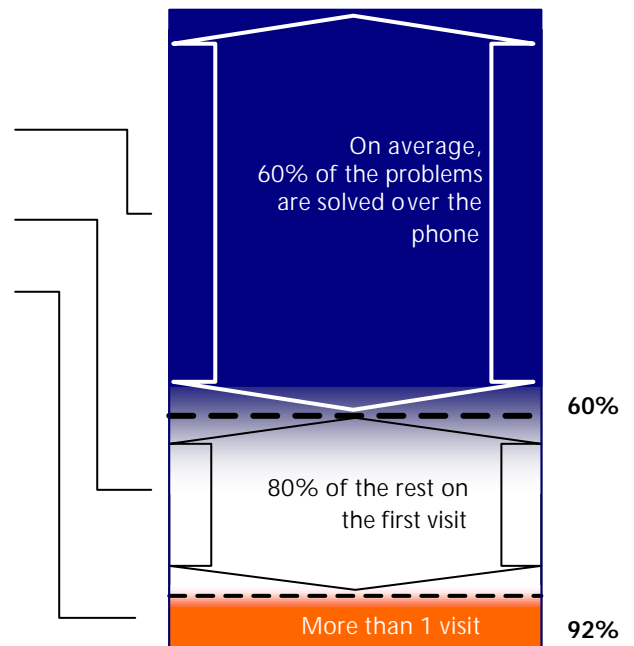
APPENDIX B

Track Record - Support Statistics

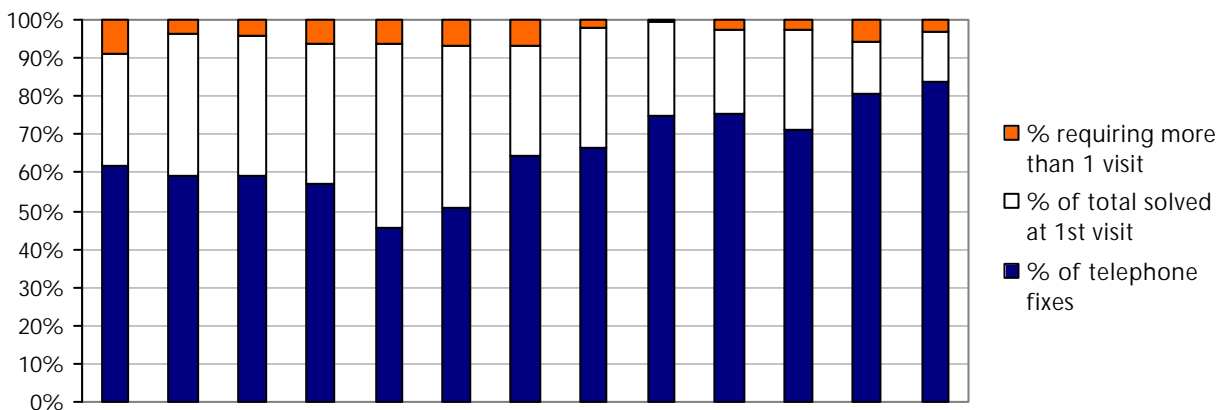
SupportPlan was founded in 1991 and, since that date, we never missed a contract deadline. Unlike many companies for whom support is just an add-on, our organisation is entirely dedicated to service. We train our engineers to the highest standards so that they stay at the forefront of IT support and technologies.

Here are the results:

- All calls have a response within a maximum of 30 minutes.
- **We resolve over three out of five calls (60%) over the phone.**
- **Of the remainder, over 80% are fixed on the first visit.**
- **So only one call in twelve (8%) requires more than one visit.**
- Our average response time to site is under five hours for Premium SupportPlan clients within Central London.
- Guaranteed response times of two, four or six hours can be arranged if required.
- Parts that are needed are sent via courier to the client's site, so that we can achieve the quickest possible fix.
- Loan systems are also available.
- We meet 100% of our response deadlines (since 1991)



Recorded statistics for the last 12 months:



APPENDIX C

Support Tools & Technologies - Standard Platform

Standard Platform is a set of tools and technologies that form the foundation of a company's IT infrastructure and the basis for its business applications. The strength of the *platform* comes from [1] the systematic use of *standard* hardware and software components of which interoperability has been thoroughly tested by major vendors and [2] from the *automation* of most of the system set-up, monitoring, maintenance and updating tasks.

Many companies and organisations have to face system failures, software crashes and security problems, occurring because their IT infrastructure has been badly configured and set up. Standard Platform allows us to configure and manage systems that are quasi-uninterruptible. As a result, our customers get the *benefits* of enterprise class systems at a commodity price point:

- **Reliability** – through the systematic use of standard hardware and software components of which interoperability has been thoroughly tested by major vendors
- **System stability** – through the standardisation and the automation of most set-up, monitoring, maintenance and updating tasks
- **Security** against external attacks – through the automatic implementation of vendors' security updates
- **Up-to-date** system and application software - through the automatic implementation of vendors' enhancements and bug fixes
- **Cost predictability and reduction** for
 - the overall system maintenance and support (less staff required thanks to automation)
 - the delivery of applications to the desktop (possibility to automate delivery on a per user basis)
 - the delivery of support through remote access whenever possible
- **Scalability** – the system can grow with the business and it's easy to add new users, applications, servers, peripherals and so on
- **Support for mobile and remote access** – the IT system and a user's files and applications can be securely accessed – only by this user, of course - from any system connected to the Internet or through the set-up of a so-called virtual private network (letting the user work from home or a remote site)
- **Continuous system monitoring** – potential problems such as lack of disk space or backup failures can be fixed before they cause business disruption
- **Resilience and fault tolerance** – critical functions and services are distributed between multiple servers to minimise the impact of a server breakdown
- **Disaster recovery** – a specific company's infrastructure can be completely re-created from off-site backups in the minimum possible time frame.

First class IT support is traditionally expensive to acquire and difficult to sustain. SupportPlan's Standard Platform leverages technologies developed for large-scale enterprises to make stable IT platforms available for small-to-medium sized businesses at an affordable price. As a consequence, companies committed to Standard Platform can stop worrying about their IT infrastructure and focus on using IT applications to gain competitive advantage.

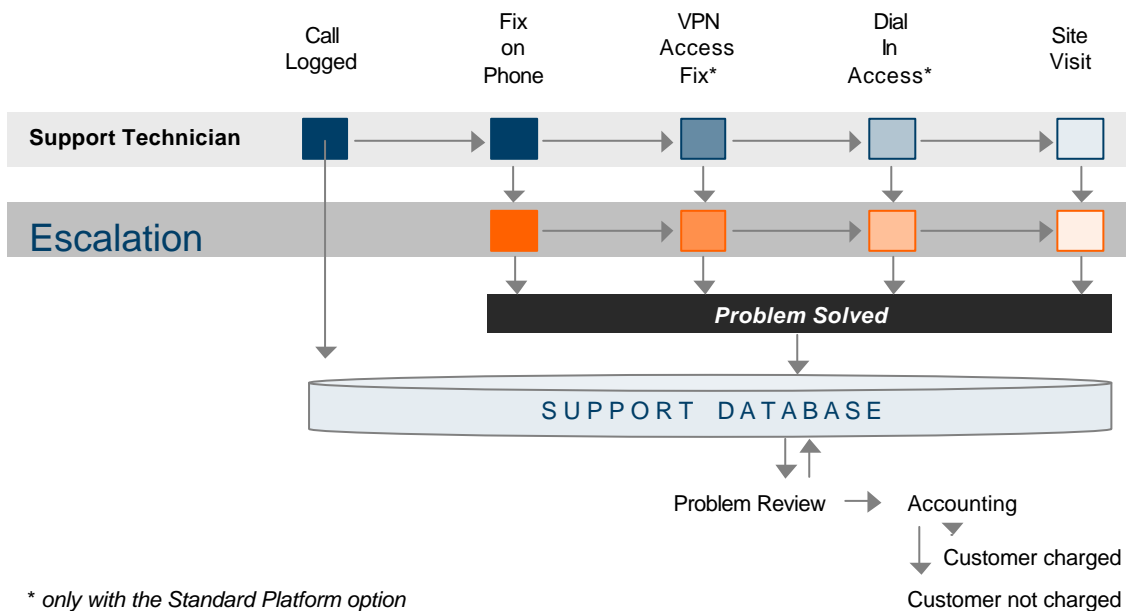
APPENDIX D

Support Tools & Technologies - Call Management System

SupportPlan’s specially developed call handling & tracking system helps to ensure that we provide prompt and effective support every time. An engineer answering a customer call has immediate access to that customer’s system specifications and history to permit quick and pertinent action.

This call handling is also integrated with our accounting and administrative systems, providing seamless delivery of quality service, no matter who in the organisation is dealing with you.

The following diagram briefly describes how the system works. When a customer calls, the question or problem is immediately logged into the system’s database. A support technician first attempts to fix the problem on the phone. Statistically, this is successful in over three out of five calls³. Otherwise he or she tries other means or escalates the problem to an engineer who follows the procedure up to, if necessary, traveling on-site.



Once the problem is solved, we update our database accordingly so that all technical details are up-to-date. We also review whether the customer should be charged or not depending on the support plan chosen. For example, unlimited telephone support is included in all the plans that we offer to match the specific customer requirements.. Our premium plan also includes on-site support, parts & labour and other features at no extra charge. Please refer to our Standard Support Plans’ Overview for more details or call us on 020 7582 9999.

³ On average, we solve between 55% and 75% of problems over the phone. Of the rest, we resolve 80% on the first visit, leaving only 5% to 9% of problems requiring a second visit. We have never missed a contract deadline since we began in 1991.