

## **Ask SCORE**

*The technology employed to run my medical supplies business has grown larger and more complex over the years. We're now at the point where our own in-house resources are really struggling to keep up, so I'm considering hiring an IT consultant. How do I find the right one for my business?*

In many ways, navigating the world of information technology (IT) has never been easier. Websites that once required extensive programming and development can now be created within hours using WordPress and other technologies. You can pick up a Wi-Fi router and be online from anywhere in your facility the same day. The proliferation of hardware—PCs, laptops, tablets and mobile devices—allows you to make purchases based on price as well as capability.

Not all aspects of IT are so easily mastered, however. Things like internal networks, servers and Internet support require a certain level of expertise. Then there's the matter of system maintenance and troubleshooting problems when they arise.

That's why many small businesses opt to outsource some or all of their IT requirements to qualified consultants. They are typically entrepreneurs themselves who apply their knowledge of technology systems to meet the needs of other small enterprises. Because they're specialists who stay abreast of emerging trends in IT, they can provide expert advice on what's needed to keep your technology investment in step with your small business needs.

And most important, they can respond immediately to emergency problems and minimize downtime—something no small business can afford in the digital age.

Selecting a qualified IT consultant does require some upfront work on your part. You must first determine what your IT needs are, and which ones you want to outsource. Though most consultants offer a wide range of services, it may be more practical to keep some functions in-house.

An Internet search will likely turn up several consultants in your area, but you can also ask your small business colleagues for referrals. Consider several candidates before making a selection. Look for someone who has demonstrated expertise in key areas, and has done work for businesses similar to yours.

Interview the candidates as you would prospective employees. After all, you'll be working closely with them, so you'll want to have a good comfort level as well as confidence in their abilities. A key consideration is their ability to convey technical jargon in plain terms, both to you and to any employees they may work with.

And be sure to request and check references. Ask about the consultant's responsiveness to problems, as well as his/her initiative in assessing your needs. Whoever you choose will be responsible for a critical component of your small business infrastructure, and you want to be sure it will be well taken care of.

*This column is brought to you by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE, with nearly 70 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business mentoring and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit [merrimackvalley.score.org](http://merrimackvalley.score.org) for information on mentoring, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.*

