

# THE HIDDEN COST OF BAD IT SUPPORT

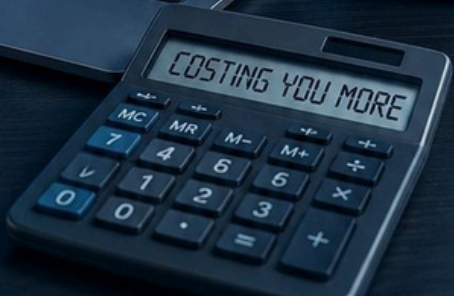
What your current IT provider is **really costing you** - beyond the contract



A practical guide for business owners, finance directors and operations leaders



- ✓ Downtime
- ✓ Lost Productivity
- ✓ Frustrated Staff
- ✓ Security Risks
- ✓ Unexpected Costs





# THE COST MOST BUSINESSES NEVER MEASURE

When businesses consider the cost of IT support, they focus on the contract. The monthly invoice. The per-user fee. That's the number that goes in the budget, gets approved by the board, and reappears on the P&L every quarter. It is also, almost without exception, the smallest part of what bad IT support actually costs. The real cost sits everywhere else. The hour your finance director loses each morning waiting for a system to respond affects staff morale and productivity. In delayed projects and staff resignations caused by poor support, which can harm team engagement. None of these costs appears in the IT contract, but they significantly impact your business.



The cheapest IT contract we ever inherited had a monthly fee 30% below market rate. The hidden cost productivity drag, stalled projects, two key staff resignations and a serious near-miss on cyber added up to four times the annual contract value. The customer thought they were saving money. They weren't.

- o Recurring lesson from new client transitions

This guide gives you the framework to identify whether bad IT support is affecting your business across five overlooked areas helping you feel more in control and confident in your decisions with a clear, credible view of what good support looks like.

## Use this guide as

- ➊ A diagnostic on your current IT provider's actual performance beyond the SLA report.
  - A justification framework for renegotiating, expanding scope, or moving to a new provider.
- ➋ A board-level briefing on operational risk hidden inside the IT relationship.
- ➌ A calibration tool before your next contract review or renewal.

## Who this is for

Business owners, finance directors and operations leaders in UK SMEs with an existing IT support arrangement internal team, outsourced MSP, or hybrid. Particularly relevant if you have any sense that the relationship has drifted, costs are rising without visible improvement, or you simply have no benchmark for whether what you're getting is good.



### Want a free benchmark of your current IT support?

We offer a free IT Support Benchmark Review, we look at your current contract, your ticket performance, your strategic engagement, and your security posture, and tell you honestly how it compares against modern UK SME standards. The report is yours regardless of whether you choose to engage further. Completed within five working days.

- Request your free Benchmark Review at [systemforce.co.uk](https://systemforce.co.uk)

## THE FIVE HIDDEN COSTS OF BAD IT SUPPORT

Picture the IT support relationship as an iceberg, much like the downtime cost framework. The contract value is the visible part above the waterline. The five hidden costs below sit underneath, invisible day-to-day, painfully visible at year-end.

Hidden cost	What it actually means	Typical 50-user p.a.
Productivity drag	Slow tickets, repeat issues, ageing kit, workarounds, staff working around the system instead of with it.	£25,000–£60,000
Project paralysis	Internal projects are delayed because IT can't or won't support them. Strategic initiatives stall.	£15,000–£40,000
Staff churn	Frustration with bad tools accelerates departures, particularly in technical and customer-facing roles.	£10,000–£35,000
Security drift	Patching slips, MFA partial, backups untested, controls degrade. Insurance and compliance exposure builds.	£5,000–unlimited
Strategic blind spot	No proactive advice, no roadmap, no quarterly review. Business leadership flies blind on IT.	Hard to quantify, often the largest



**What this typically means:** for a 50-user UK SME, the hidden cost of a sub-par IT support arrangement typically runs £55,000 to £135,000 per year somewhere between one and three times the annual contract value. The contract is the smallest line in the equation. It is also the only line most businesses ever look at.



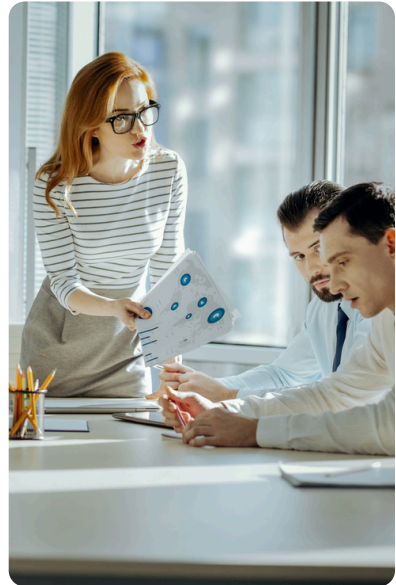
# 1. PRODUCTIVITY DRAG

Productivity drag is the most common hidden cost and the easiest to miss. It rarely shows up as a single visible event. It accumulates a few minutes here waiting for a slow login, an hour there fighting a printer that should just work, a half-day a week that the operations team spends triaging issues their IT provider should have prevented.

Two patterns drive most productivity drag. First, slow ticket resolution issues that should be fixed in minutes take days, leaving staff with workarounds that make them slower at the things they're paid to be fast at. Second, recurring issues problems that get "fixed" but come back the following week, because nobody's invested the time to address the root cause.

## How to spot it

- ✓ Staff routinely complain about IT in ways that suggest acceptance, not surprise ("oh, that always happens").
- ✓ Ticket times are reported in days rather than hours.
- ✓ The same five or ten issues recur month after month.
- ✓ Departments have built workarounds spreadsheets, manual processes, side-channel apps to avoid the IT-supported way of doing things.
- ✓ New starters comment on how slow or frustrating the systems are, before they've adapted.



**How much it costs:** for a typical 50-user UK SME, the productivity drag of just 1.5 hours per staff member per week barely noticeable individually equates to £126,000 per year at average loaded hourly rates. The calculator in this guide lets you work out your own number.



## 2. PROJECT PARALYSIS

Most businesses experience project stalls, such as CRM upgrades or network refreshes, often due to IT provider capacity or prioritisation issues. Recognising these signs helps leaders evaluate if their IT support is contributing to project delays. Project paralysis isn't usually about technical capability. It's about capacity, prioritisation and proactive engagement. Good IT providers manage their workload in line with their clients' strategic priorities. Mediocre providers absorb whatever ad-hoc work arrives and quietly let strategic work fall to the bottom of the queue.

### How to spot it

- ✔ Strategic IT projects routinely overrun by months, with no consistent reason given.
- ✔ Your IT provider rarely brings new ideas you're always the one initiating change.
- ✔ There is no documented IT roadmap or there is one, but it's been the same for two years.
- ✔ Your provider's quarterly review (if it happens) is reactive, not strategic "what tickets did we close" rather than "what should we do next".
- ✔ Capital and project budgets get returned unspent at year-end.

## 3. STAFF CHURN

Bad IT contributes to staff churn in ways businesses rarely connect. Frustration with tools is a slow, cumulative drag on engagement, particularly in technical, customer-facing, and speed-dependent roles. By the time someone resigns over a laptop that won't work, the resignation reads as "about a laptop" but the laptop was the symptom, not the cause. The cost of replacing a leaver is well documented and substantial: typically 25–50% of their annual salary in recruitment, training, and lost productivity, before factoring in the institutional knowledge that walks out the door. Even one or two attributable departures per year, in a 50-user business, can add £20,000–£40,000 to the hidden cost ledger.

### How to spot it

- ✔ Exit interview themes mention tools, equipment, or IT support directly or by implication.
- ✔ Customer-facing teams (sales, account management) report IT as a barrier to performance.
- ✔ Technical staff (developers, engineers, designers) work around the standard IT setup.
- ✔ Hardware refreshes are stretched well past their useful life, and staff notice.
- ✔ New starters' first impression of the IT environment is poor.



## 4. SECURITY DRIFT

Security drift is the hidden cost with the longest tail and the highest variance. Most months, it costs nothing. The month it costs something, it can cost everything.

Drift accumulates from small operational lapses. Patching slips behind schedule. MFA gets enabled on most accounts, but not all. Backups are configured but never tested. Conditional Access policies get loosened "temporarily" and never tightened back up.

None of these is catastrophic on its own. Together they describe a security posture that's measurably worse than it was two years ago, with no single decision to point at.

Insurance carriers have noticed. Cyber insurance underwriting has tightened materially in 2024–2025 and continues to tighten. Insurers now actively interrogate MFA enforcement, EDR deployment, backup testing, and incident response readiness the exact areas most likely to drift under inattentive IT support. Premium increases of 50–100% at renewal are increasingly common; outright refusal to renew is no longer rare.

### How to spot it

- ✓ You can't quickly answer the question "Are all our endpoints fully patched?"
- ✓ MFA is described as "enabled", but you can't evidence that it's enforced for every account, every application.
- ✓ You don't know when a real backup restore was last successfully tested.
- ✓ Your provider doesn't proactively report on security posture only on tickets.
- ✓ The last cyber insurance renewal involved questions your provider couldn't answer cleanly.



**Cross-reference:** the System Force Cyber Security Framework white paper and the Cyber Insurance Readiness Guide both go deeper on this. If security drift is a concern, those are the natural follow-ups.



## 5. STRATEGIC BLIND SPOT

The fifth hidden cost is the hardest to quantify and often the largest in real terms. Without a credible IT partner who is genuinely engaged with the business, leadership teams make strategic decisions with incomplete information about technology risk and opportunity. This shows up in different ways. A business considering an acquisition without realising the target's tech debt will require a £200,000 platform overhaul. A finance director benchmarking the IT spend against a peer group without realising the peers have stronger automation and lower headcount. A board committing to a new product launch without anyone flagging that the underlying systems can't support the volume. None of these is an IT problem narrowly defined. All of them require an IT partner at the table when the strategy is made and most aren't.

### How to spot it

- ✔ Your provider is never invited to leadership meetings, and never asks to be.
- ✔ The annual review (if there is one) is operational, not strategic.
- ✔ There is no named senior account contact who knows your business beyond the ticket queue.
- ✔ No one is briefing the leadership team on emerging technology risks or opportunities.
- ✔ You couldn't describe your provider's view of where your IT should be in three years.



**What good looks like:** a quarterly business review where the IT partner brings a forward roadmap, flags risks the business hasn't seen, and challenges the spending that isn't delivering. The conversation should be measured in business outcomes, not ticket statistics.





# CALCULATE THE HIDDEN COST FOR YOUR BUSINESS.

The worksheet below estimates the three quantifiable categories productivity drag, project paralysis, and staff churn. Security drift and a strategic blind spot are deliberately excluded; their values are real but variable, and assigning a synthetic number to them weakens the credibility of the rest of the model.

Variable	Your business	Worked example (50 staff)
A. Number of staff affected by IT	_____	50
B. Average loaded hourly cost (£)	£_____	£35
C. Avg productivity loss per staff per week (hours)	_____	1.5
D. Weekly drag ( $A \times B \times C$ )	£_____	£2,625
E. Annual productivity drag ( $D \times 48$ ) based on 48 working weeks per year	£_____	£126,000
F. Stalled projects per year (number)	_____	2
G. Average value lost per stalled project (£)	£_____	£15,000
H. Annual project paralysis ( $F \times G$ )	£_____	£30,000
I. Staff churn attributable to IT frustration (people)	_____	1
J. Replacement cost per leaver (£)	£_____	£20,000
K. Annual churn attributable cost ( $I \times J$ )	£_____	£20,000
<b>ANNUAL HIDDEN COST</b>	£_____	£176,000
Compared with the annual contract value	£_____	~£60,000
Hidden cost as a multiple of the contract	_____	~3x



## How to populate the worksheet

- ❶ A. Number of staff affected anyone whose work depends on supported IT systems. Almost always, your whole headcount.
- ❷ B. Loaded hourly cost base salary divided by working hours, plus 35–50% for on-costs (NI, pension, overheads).
- ❸ C. Productivity loss per staff per week be honest. Even if the figure feels small per person, the multiplier is large.
- ❹ F & G. Stalled projects count the projects that should have been delivered and weren't. Estimate the value of each conservatively.
- ❺ I & J. Staff churn only count departures where IT frustration was a meaningful contributor. Replacement cost typically runs 25–50% of salary.



**Important:** the worked example produces a hidden-cost figure roughly 3× the annual contract value. That is typical, not extreme. If your worksheet produces less than 1×, your IT support is probably better than average. If it produces more than 4×, you are not getting value for money by any reasonable measure.





# THE 10 SYMPTOMS OF BAD IT SUPPORT

If the calculator feels too involved, the scorecard below is a faster diagnostic. Ten yes/no questions. Tick "Yes" only if the symptom is genuinely present in your current arrangement not just "sometimes" or "a bit". Score yourself out of ten and read the bands below.

Symptom	Yes	No
1. Tickets routinely take longer than 24 hours to resolve, even when urgent.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. The same problems keep coming back fixes don't seem to stick.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. We hear about IT issues from staff before our IT provider tells us.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. We don't have a written IT roadmap, or we haven't reviewed one in 12+ months.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Strategic projects get delayed because IT "hasn't got round to it".	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. We're not sure whether our backups have ever been successfully restored.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. MFA is enabled "in some places" but not enforced everywhere.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. We don't get clear monthly or quarterly reporting on IT health.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Our IT contract has auto-renewed without a meaningful review.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. When something serious goes wrong, we're not confident who's accountable.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



## Score interpretation

Score	What it means	What to do
0 – 2	HEALTHY	You have a working relationship. Maintain through quarterly reviews and benchmarking.
3 – 5	DRIFTING	Specific gaps that compound over time. Address through a structured review with your provider.
6 – 8	UNDERPERFORMING	Service is consistently below what you should expect, time to benchmark seriously and consider alternatives.
9 – 10	FAILING	Material risk to the business. Plan a switch most contracts can be exited cleanly with proper handover.



**Important:** the scorecard reveals symptoms, not diagnosis. A high score doesn't automatically mean switching providers is right but it absolutely means the relationship needs a structured review. The most common pattern we see is businesses scoring 6–8 who have never had a serious benchmarking conversation; once they do, the choice between renegotiation and switching becomes obvious.





# WHAT GOOD IT SUPPORT ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

It's easy to identify what bad IT support looks like. Defining what good looks like is harder because the bar is set differently in every business, and most leadership teams have nothing to benchmark against.

The list below distils what we believe modern UK SMEs should expect from a serious managed IT partner in 2026.

## Operational excellence

- ✔ Tickets resolved within published SLAs, with realistic performance against them not theatre.
- ✔ Issues fixed at root cause, not just symptom recurrence rates tracked and reduced over time.
- ✔ Proactive monitoring catches issues before users notice the majority of "incidents" are resolved silently.
- ✔ Patch management automated, with monthly reporting and emergency response capability.
- ✔ Standard build process for new devices laptops arrive ready, not ready-to-be-fixed.

## Strategic engagement

- ✔ Quarterly business review with leadership forward-looking, business-outcome focused, not a ticket recap.
- ✔ Documented IT roadmap maintained jointly, reviewed and updated each quarter.
- ✔ Named a senior account contact who knows your business, not just your tickets.
- ✔ Proactive recommendations on cost optimisation, productivity, security and risk.
- ✔ Cross-departmental support finance for licensing strategy, operations for change planning, HR for joiners and leavers.



## Security and resilience by default

- ✓ Cyber Essentials maintained as a minimum baseline, not a one-off project.
- ✓ MFA enforced via Conditional Access on every account, every application verifiable, not assumed.
- ✓ EDR deployed across endpoints, not legacy antivirus, with monitored alerts.
- ✓ Third-party Microsoft 365 backup with tested restore not just native retention.
- ✓ Documented incident response plan, with named owners, rehearsed at least annually.
- ✓ Security posture reported quarterly with a clear current-state snapshot and forward improvement plan.

## Commercial transparency

- ✓ Contracts that scale sensibly with headcount no penalty clauses for growing or shrinking.
- ✓ Clear, predictable monthly invoicing with no surprise charges.
- ✓ Project work scoped, costed and delivered transparently fixed price where possible, not open-ended day rates.
- ✓ Annual benchmarking your provider proactively shows you how their pricing compares.
- ✓ Sensible exit terms most contracts can be exited cleanly with 60–90 days' notice and proper handover.



**The honest test:** if you read that list and find yourself thinking "we don't get most of that", the issue is not whether your IT support is bad. The issue is what you're going to do about it. Renegotiation works in some cases. In others, the structural mismatch between provider and business has gone too far to fix without changing one of them.



# IF YOU'RE CONSIDERING A SWITCH

Switching IT providers is less disruptive than most businesses fear, provided it's planned properly. The horror stories almost always trace to one of three things: choosing the new provider on price, switching without proper transition planning, or being held hostage by an outgoing provider with no documented handover. All three are avoidable.

## What a clean transition looks like

- ✓ Discovery and audit of the current environment by the new provider, with full access before commitment.
- ✓ Documented transition plan with phases, milestones, and named owners on both sides.
- ✓ Knowledge transfer from outgoing provider formally requested, with reasonable expectations and notice.
- ✓ Parallel running where appropriate particularly for monitoring, security and backup services.
- ✓ Phased cutover for user-facing changes one team or department at a time, not big-bang.
- ✓ Communication plan for staff, what's changing, when, and what to expect.
- ✓ Post-transition review at 30, 60 and 90 days measured against agreed success criteria.

## Common myths about switching

- ✗ "It will be too disruptive" a properly planned transition is invisible to most users.
- ✗ "We're locked into a long contract" most contracts can be exited cleanly; even those with penalties usually pencil out positively against the hidden costs.
- ✗ "We'll lose our institutional knowledge" proper handover is contractually required of the outgoing provider; what they don't know already isn't worth keeping.
- ✗ "It's too expensive to change" switching costs are typically 10–20% of an annual contract; the hidden cost of staying is usually multiples of that, every year.
- ✗ "We won't find anyone better" the SME MSP market has matured significantly; modern providers operate at standards most legacy contracts don't even attempt.



**Practical note:** the most useful first step is rarely "switch immediately". It is "benchmark properly". A serious benchmarking exercise gives you the evidence to negotiate decisively with your current provider, or the confidence to move with a clear-eyed view of what you're moving to. Either outcome is better than another year of uncertainty.



# HOW SYSTEM FORCE IT CAN HELP

We are a managed IT and cybersecurity provider based in Gloucestershire, serving UK SMEs across the professional services, manufacturing, healthcare, financial services, and digital sectors. We deliberately position ourselves as enterprise-grade rather than low-cost, and our clients are businesses where IT is operationally critical, not commodity overhead. Our average client tenure is multi-year because we work hard at staying useful.

## System Force IT delivers:

- Free IT Support Benchmark Reviews honest assessment of your current arrangement against modern UK SME standards.
- Fully managed IT services sized to your business, contracted to your SLAs, accountable to your board.
- Co-managed arrangements partnership with your internal team rather than replacement of it.
- Strategic IT consultancy quarterly business reviews, roadmap planning, board-level reporting.
- Cyber security, Cyber Essentials, ISO 27001 alignment, ongoing managed security.
- Microsoft 365, networking, VoIP and infrastructure the full enterprise IT stack, delivered to SME budgets and timelines.
- Structured transitions from existing providers, discreet, professional, and designed to minimise disruption.



### Book a free IT Support Benchmark Review.

One of our senior consultants will spend 60 minutes understanding your current IT support arrangement, your operational priorities, and your concerns. We follow up with a benchmarked report covering ticket performance, strategic engagement, security posture, and commercial fairness with a costed recommendation. Free of charge, fully confidential, and the report is yours to keep regardless of next steps.

- Book your free Benchmark Review at [systemforce.co.uk](https://systemforce.co.uk)



**Or call us directly:** 01452 701355 We're based in Gloucestershire and serve UK SMEs who expect more from their IT.



## Companion resources

- The True Cost of IT Downtime: [systemforce.co.uk/resources/cost-of-it-downtime-uk-businesses](https://systemforce.co.uk/resources/cost-of-it-downtime-uk-businesses)
- The System Force Cyber Security Framework (white paper): [systemforce.co.uk/resources/cyber-security-framework-for-smes](https://systemforce.co.uk/resources/cyber-security-framework-for-smes)
- Backup & Disaster Recovery Checklist: [systemforce.co.uk/resources/backup-disaster-recovery-checklist](https://systemforce.co.uk/resources/backup-disaster-recovery-checklist)
- Cyber Essentials Readiness Checklist: [systemforce.co.uk/resources/cyber-essentials-readiness-checklist](https://systemforce.co.uk/resources/cyber-essentials-readiness-checklist)

This document is provided for general guidance only. Cost figures are typical UK SME ranges based on industry data and our own engagements; actual costs vary significantly by business model, sector, headcount and contract structure. The scorecard and worksheet are planning tools, not formal audits.





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 [www.systemforce.co.uk](https://www.systemforce.co.uk)

 [sales@systemforce.co.uk](mailto:sales@systemforce.co.uk)

