



How Do I Know If An IT Managed Service Provider (MSP) Is Right for My Nonprofit Organization?

Self Assessment to Evaluate Organization Size, Stage of Growth, and IT Support Needs



If your nonprofit is considering managed IT services, it's critical to work with a company that can provide high-quality service that fits.

But you may be asking what is Managed Service and would my organization benefit from the Managed Service Provide model of IT support?

"Managed services" can mean different things to different people. To understand what your organization IT needs, depending on your size and stage of growth – here is a short self-assessment.



Community IT Experience and Background

Community IT Innovators is celebrating its 20th year as an independent company in 2021, and our history stretches back almost a decade before that as we served nonprofits with technology support before spinning out on our own.

Over the past two decades we have served nonprofits at every stage of their maturity. We have served stable organizations as well as nonprofits experiencing rapid growth. We have served nonprofits who were re-evaluating and re-directing their mission, those who were shrinking their field operations or programs, and those who were rebuilding after a major change in their fundraising, mission, board, or executive team. We have been honored to serve venerable institutions and scrappy start-ups.

Our practices have changed over the years – not just as nonprofit technology itself has changed and developed, but in our approach and understanding of the needs of the sector. The field has moved from the days of “everyone is an accidental techie” to seeing IT as a fundamental part of effective organizational strategy. We have learned a lot along the way about how to effectively manage IT for nonprofit organizations.

Community IT is a 100% employee-owned company, and over half of our staff has been with us for over a decade. Our team of 36 staff is dedicated to helping nonprofit organizations advance their missions through the effective use of technology, and we support 5300 seats/staff at over 140 clients. We’re technology experts, we are a Microsoft Gold Partner, and we’ve been consistently named a top managed services provider by Channel Futures and received this honor again in 2020.

What is an MSP?

Managed Services Providers (MSP) deliver outsourced IT management and support services with a unique and efficient model.

In the managed services model, a nonprofit without expertise in IT management outsources their infrastructure support to the MSP. These IT services can include email administration, file management, hardware management (for workstations, servers and networking equipment), vendor management, software assessment and selection, and cybersecurity.

The MSP “keeps IT working” so the nonprofit can focus on their area of expertise and passion.

There are rare exceptions where project-based engagements may be more efficient than a monthly arrangement – for instance, if your organization has a unique data migration project or funder-initiated program-based tech project, you may need a one-time engagement.

For ongoing support, though, **managed services usually provide the most value.** For specific IT projects, an MSP is a good investment because an MSP partner will have a more strategic view of your IT roadmap, and will be able to help you implement a project within your budget and with the impact on the rest of your IT support in mind.

Managed IT support is efficient, because unlike break-fix support models, the incentives of the provider are aligned with the incentives of the nonprofit customer. The break-fix model incentivizes the vendor to repair constantly broken technology, whereas managed services incentivizes providers to be proactive in keeping technology working and avoiding costly breakdowns.

Additionally, managed services allow nonprofits access to strategic expertise at an affordable and fixed monthly price. Instead of paying only to fix issues – which can lead to more issues and greater costs in the long run – nonprofits using an MSP get access to entire IT teams with expertise in every type of technology. This allows for better strategic planning at rates that would be less feasible through other support models.

How Do I Know If An MSP Is Right For My Organization?

How large is your organization now – under 5 staff, 5-25, 25-50, 50-100, 100+?

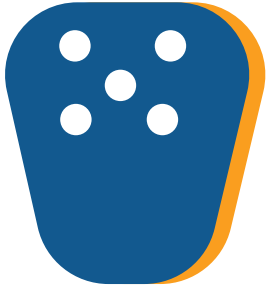
Where are you in the stages of the organizational life cycle – start-up, high growth, moderate growth, redirecting IT investments, stable, mature?

Below you will find options and advice for the size of your staff and your stage of growth.

Caveat: You may benefit from the security an MSP can provide, no matter your size or maturity, if your organization has specific cybersecurity or programmatic concerns that require a stronger IT support. Some examples are nonprofits that work internationally, in a politically sensitive policy area, or serve clients such as children where records must be kept more secure.

#1

Under 5 Staff/ Start Up Period



Unless you have advanced technology needs specific to your mission or program, an MSP is probably more than you need for now, and may be unaffordable at your present size. As a start-up, or with limited staff and no plan to grow, you can probably manage your IT in house, with free or low-cost tools that are widely available, such as Microsoft Office 365.

At this size, your staff probably share many internal business functions and strategic planning, but we recommend designating one person (often the CFO or ED) as the IT leader, and investing in that person's growth and professional development in order to manage or outsource IT project management on an as-needed basis. However, even if you are just starting up, developing a technology roadmap and IT plan can save many headaches down the road as you invest in IT that can grow with you.

CASE STUDY: Connecting Small Remote Staff to Shared Information Systems

Community IT has guided many clients in choosing and implementing next generation technology platforms to support small staff moving from a start-up period.

One of our clients had six staff all working remotely and occasionally in a small office. As a start-up, they had never invested in a solid technology foundation. They had an old, aging server that crashed constantly. They wanted to find a “serverless” file sharing solution that would allow them to securely access files in the office and remotely, and they wanted to invest in cloud technology that would be stable and easy to update into the future. This would allow them to serve their existing clients and grow their services, staff, and organization goals.

The client relied on Community IT to guide them in choosing and implementing a next generation cloud solution, and appreciated having a vendor-agnostic partner with deep vendor landscape understanding to guide and support them through the process. [Read more here.](#)

#2

5-25 Staff/High Growth Period



Once your organization employs at least five staff, an MSP is a good investment.

At this size, you can try to manage your IT in-house if your technology needs are limited, but you are probably beginning to run into larger IT projects or organization-wide needs that may be in conflict or creating cybersecurity risks. You may be creating IT silos between development, accounting, and online marketing. Uncoordinated IT growth creates inefficiencies and risks of IT project failure.

Are you growing or planning to grow? Take steps now to prepare your nonprofit to effectively use and manage technology as you grow in staff size and mission scope.

If your organization is growing, it is important to align your technology with your strategic growth plan. Strategic technology planning and a solid IT roadmap are essential for guiding your IT investments. Strategic planning may be outside the scope and experience of your ad hoc, in-house IT team.

At this size, nonprofits are also vulnerable to key staff departures, which can expose the extent to which your IT support was dependent on a single person without redundancy. When that person moves on, they take all your IT knowledge with them.

Nonprofits at this size and stage of early growth also may lack the expertise in the sector to reliably vet vendors or be able to assess technology that will provide a solid foundation and grow along with the organization. Community IT has helped many clients who discovered they had made poor technology investments without knowing the landscape of vendors and services.

Fortunately, making strategic IT investments at this stage results in considerable savings and value creation for the future, whether or not your organization continues to grow. An assessment process can help you develop a roadmap and determine whether to use an MSP at this size.

If you are planning to continue to grow, or if you are considering large IT projects, it is time to investigate the MSP model and determine what is right for you.

CASE STUDY: Manage IT Costs and Plan for New Technologies.

Community IT provides a dedicated IT Business Manager to all our managed IT clients, assessing and evaluating IT needs and our responsiveness on an ongoing basis.

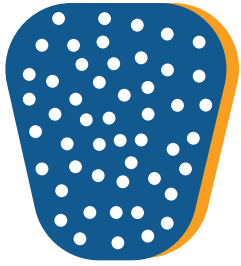
One of our clients is an organization with a staff of about 20. They were not large enough to justify hiring a full-time staff member for an IT role. When the client was a smaller organization, they subleased space and relied upon their landlord's IT service provider.

As they grew and moved into their own office space, the client knew they would need to build out their IT capabilities and IT support function. Additionally, new technologies offered them a wide variety of opportunities, but also brought a bewildering array of choices. They did not have the time or expertise to assess which technology solutions would best serve the needs of their growing organization. An MSP was quite clearly the best option for this client at this size and with these needs. [Read more here.](#)



#3

25-50 Staff/ Moderate Growth-Mature Period



An MSP is the optimal IT delivery model for nonprofit organizations with 25-50 staff, from a cost-benefit standpoint and from a cost-center standpoint.

Community IT has rarely been in contact with a nonprofit of this size utilizing an in-house IT department adequate to their needs. In fact, a majority of our clients have come to us at this size with substantial underinvestment or mis-investment. Often that underinvestment was the result of relying on an ad hoc in-house IT person. Underinvestment can also stem from an IT support provider working in a strict break/fix model, after the costs of maintaining the correct size and skill level of the in-house department had outgrown the ability of the organization to invest in staff and equipment.

If you are this size and not using an MSP with the capacity to support nonprofit organizations strategically, an initial assessment and roadmap will help demonstrate the ROI on outsourcing IT support, project management, and strategic planning.

Organizations in this size have sophisticated and varied technology challenges that aren't easily addressed by a single in-house skill set. The technology landscape is varied and dynamic, and in-house staff often don't get the opportunities and training to evaluate and implement the correct solution. Partnering with an MSP can provide you with access to a deep set of technical resources that can ensure that you have the right IT systems in place to securely run your organization.

Developing an IT roadmap will help prioritize in-house staff and professional career paths. For example, many nonprofits at this size should outsource their help desk function, which can free up in-house staff to focus on projects and planning. An in-house team can lead implementation of technology solutions that are specific and unique to the organization.

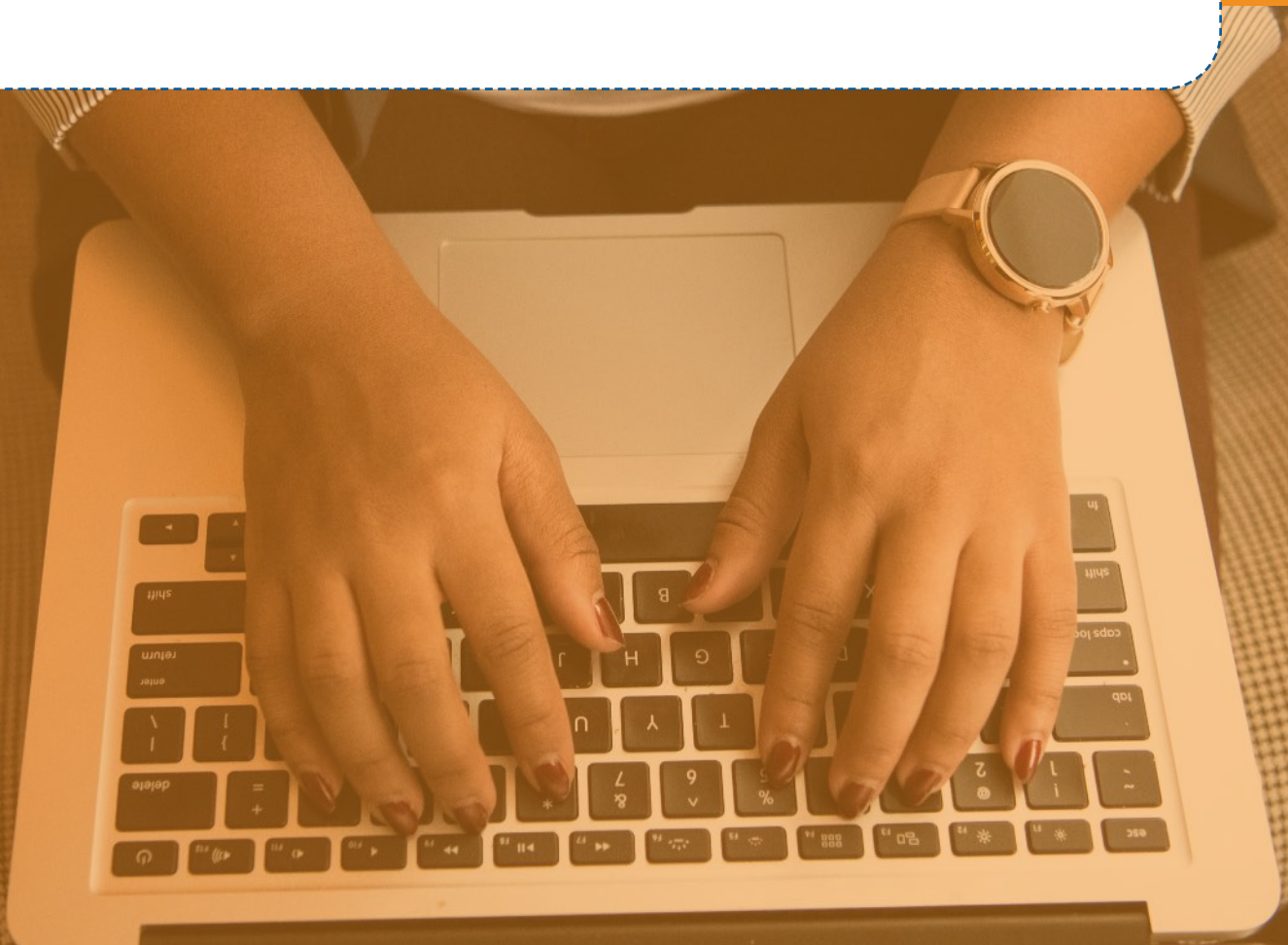
Community IT relies on a collaborative model involving nonprofit executives, in-house IT staff, and other outsourced vendors, all working together on defining and delivering on a customized technology roadmap. We view in-house IT staff as partners in supporting the organization.

CASE STUDY: Mac Management for a Mid-Sized Nonprofit.

Community IT Innovators has decades of experience supporting Mac-Windows hybrid environments and all-Mac offices.

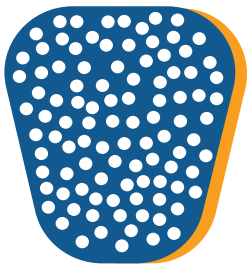
One of our clients is a mid-sized nonprofit that had been using Apple computers for their day-to-day work for over a decade. The staff were very comfortable using Apple. However, the management of Apple workstations at a business-wide level is a challenge for many organizations.

As the client grew, critical management of these devices such as inventory management, security patching and operating system upgrades became impossible to administer internally. Community IT provided an outsourced help desk and MSP services, and working collaboratively with this client, was able to fully support their preferred platform, avoiding a large change management process to move them to a Windows environment. [Read more here](#)



#4

50-100 Staff/ Mature and Stable Growth or Redirecting IT Investments Period



Managed services are still typically the best IT delivery model in this size range, although depending on the mission and technology needs of the organization, a co-management model may also be advantageous.

As nonprofits grow closer to 100 staff, the benefits of investing in a robust, in-house IT department grow. With strategic planning, the transition from fully outsourced to mostly in-house, or a co-managed environment, can be a smooth one.

It is also the case that, depending on the mission, your large organization may have specific application development, data management or cybersecurity needs that are best managed in-house, or best outsourced. An assessment and strategic roadmap will help you customize your IT support to the right level.

If you have been working with a trusted MSP like Community IT, which can advise on strategic planning and budgeting, your provider can make honest recommendations on which approach to IT support makes the most sense and will create the most value for the organization.

Community IT often recommends co-management, where a larger nonprofit organization will outsource some of their IT support, especially for large projects where their in-house staff don't have the specific expertise, vendor connections, or time available for oversight and reporting.

It also happens that at this size, particularly for established organizations, what has been working for IT support may be showing its age. Ironically, larger, more mature organizations, while able to invest in new technologies early on, may be likely to rely on older technology over a longer time period to fully recoup that investment. The technology outlives its usefulness.

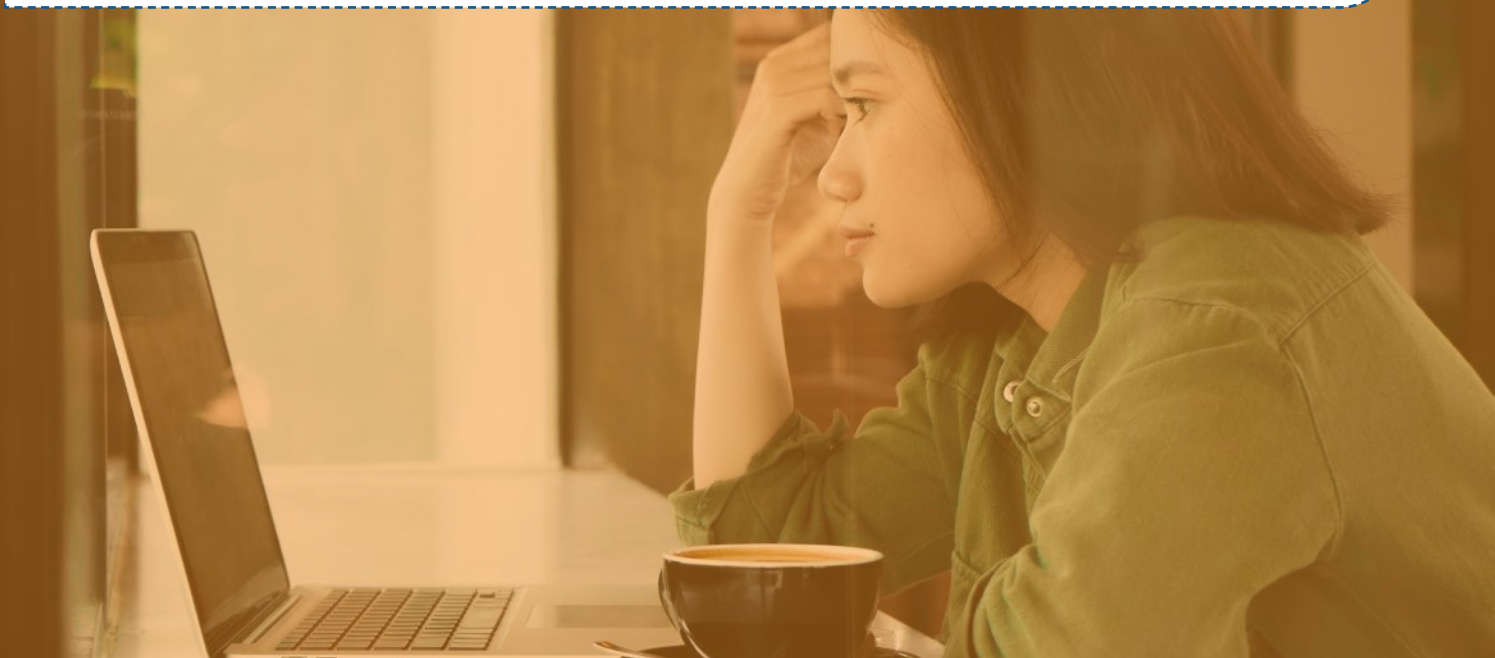
Community IT has helped established nonprofits migrate away from legacy IT infrastructure and information systems that no longer provide either the functionality or ROI they once did, or where the vendor has ceased coverage. An assessment of your pain points and a roadmap to implement updates can get your organization back on track and ready for more decades of service delivery.

CASE STUDY: Update Legacy Applications for a Large Nonprofit

One of our clients works in more than 130 countries and was positioned for a new period of growth. However, the client was heavily invested in a core set of legacy applications developed specifically for the organization, many of which had not seen a significant upgrade for more than a decade. The business model of the organization had changed considerably, and the applications no longer addressed their needs, nor could the proprietary technology be supported.

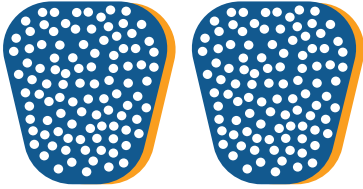
Community IT helped this client reconsider their entire information technology strategy, including all information systems and departments. After an analysis and assessment of the business needs of the organization, Community IT proposed an overall strategy for redesigning their approach to IT and led the organization to specific information system selections to integrate finance/accounting, HR/talent, program management, and business development.

This was a massive change management engagement over considerable time. This client needed an interim CIO and a strong technology roadmap. Happily, at this size and stage in their growth, this client had the resources and leadership to invest in these business-critical technology updates. [Read more here.](#)



#5

**100+ Staff/
Stable Period**



This size organization generally needs an in-house IT department. Community IT uses a co-management format for clients this size and larger. We work collaboratively and long term on supplementing the in-house IT where needed, particularly for software selection and large implementations where outsourcing to a trusted MSP with extensive knowledge of nonprofit operations and nonprofit technology software vendors and trends is a valuable investment.



Looking for a Managed Service Provider You Can Trust?

Hopefully, this framework is helpful as you evaluate your needs and options for service providers. If you're looking for more help, let's talk.

If you are ready to engage an MSP, please use our [Nonprofit Guide to Vetting a Managed Service Provider](#) to learn questions you can ask to evaluate service quality and fit.

At Community IT Innovators, we've exclusively served nonprofits for almost 30 years, empowering them to accomplish their missions with better IT support.

We have low technician turnover and certifications across all major platforms. We're strategic, tactical, and tailored to you; we constantly research and evaluate new technologies to ensure that you get cutting-edge solutions that are crafted to the needs of your organization, and that will last into your future.

We'd love to talk through this framework with you in detail, or to discuss any other questions you might have around managed services.

If you're looking for a managed services provider you can trust, **contact us at 202.234.1600** or online. One of our consultants will be in touch quickly to talk through your needs.

