ITVORTEX

SIMPLIFY. PROTECT. EVOLVE.

PREMIER BROADCOM VCSP PARTNER / VMWARE-POWERED CLOUD

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The IT Leader's Guide to Evaluating MSPs.

Twelve critical questions, defensible SLA benchmarks, the red flags that should disqualify a provider, and a scoring rubric you can use to objectively compare every MSP on your shortlist.

12	7	10	60
CRITICAL QUESTIONS	SLA BENCHMARKS	RED FLAGS	POINT RUBRIC

theitvortex.com
Paramus, NJ / 1 (844) 704-0684

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WHY THIS FRAMEWORK EXISTS

Most MSP evaluations are won on the demo, then lost in the contract.

MSP sales cycles reward the polished pitch. Operational reality rewards something different: clear SLAs, real architecture, named engineers, and exit terms you can live with. This framework gives IT leaders a **repeatable, defensible process** for cutting through the slideware and comparing providers on what actually matters once the contract is signed.

73%

of IT leaders report at least one major service degradation from their primary MSP in the past 24 months.

Industry benchmark, 2024-2025

$5,600

average cost per minute of unplanned downtime for mid-market enterprises.

Gartner, multi-year average

4.2 yrs

average MSP contract length, with 60%+ carrying auto-renewal and price escalator clauses.

Industry benchmark, 2024

How to use this guide

STEP 01

Ask all 12 questions, verbatim.

Send the questions to every provider on your shortlist in writing. Demand written answers. The quality of a written response tells you more than any sales call ever will.

STEP 02

Score each answer 1 to 5.

Use the scoring rubric on page 7. Score independently, then reconcile as a team. Disagreement reveals which questions deserve a deeper second pass.

STEP 03

Compare to the SLA benchmarks.

Use the benchmark table on page 5 to validate every uptime, response, and recovery commitment. Anything below Tier 2 should trigger immediate follow-up or removal from the shortlist.

STEP 04

Cross-check against the red flags.

The ten red flags on page 6 are non-negotiable disqualifiers in our experience. One or two warrant deeper diligence. Three or more, walk away.

THE 12 CRITICAL QUESTIONS

What every IT leader should ask in writing.

A. SECURITY & COMPLIANCE

01 Which compliance frameworks do you actively maintain, and can you provide current attestation reports?

Why it matters: Anyone can claim alignment with a framework. Active SOC 2 Type II, ISO 27001, HIPAA, or PCI attestation requires annual audits and produces dated reports. Ask for the report cover page and date of last audit.

02 How do you handle multi-tenant isolation, and where exactly does my data reside?

Why it matters: Logical isolation is not the same as dedicated infrastructure. Demand a clear answer on tenant boundaries, encryption keys, and data residency by geography. Vague answers signal architectural debt.

03 Walk me through your incident response process. What is the notification window if my data is involved?

Why it matters: A mature MSP runs documented IR playbooks with defined notification SLAs (typically 4 to 24 hours depending on severity). If they cannot produce the runbook in writing, they do not have one.

B. PERFORMANCE & ARCHITECTURE

04 Whose hardware are you actually running, and is my workload on dedicated or shared resources?

Why it matters: "Enterprise-grade" is a marketing phrase. You want OEM names (Dell, HPE, Cisco), hypervisor versions, and a clear answer on noisy-neighbor protections. Reservations and resource pools matter.

05 Where are your data centers, and what is the actual network path between them?

Why it matters: Data center geography drives latency, sovereignty, and DR posture. Ask for Tier III or Tier IV certification, carrier diversity, and inter-DC bandwidth. Beware of resold capacity inside someone else's facility.

06 How do you handle scale, bursting, and resource contention during peak demand?

Why it matters: Quarterly closes, retail spikes, and unplanned demand are when contention shows up. The right answer covers committed capacity, burst headroom, and a clearly defined process for emergency expansion.

C. OPERATIONS & SUPPORT

07 Who answers when I call at 2 AM, where are they located, and what are their credentials?

Why it matters: A 24/7 number is meaningless if it routes to a Tier 1 reader of scripts. Ask for engineer-to-customer ratios, geographic location of the NOC, and the credentials of after-hours staff. Demand named escalation contacts.

08 What is included in baseline support versus billed as professional services?

Why it matters: The cheapest MSP on paper is often the most expensive in practice. Every change request, migration, and configuration becomes a billable line item. Request the full scope-of-services document and a current professional services rate card.

09 How do you communicate during outages, planned maintenance, and emergency changes?

Why it matters: A mature MSP has a status page, a defined notification cadence, and a published change advisory board process. If their answer is "we'll email you," that is the answer.

D. BUSINESS HEALTH & RISK

10 What happens to my data and workloads if you are acquired or go out of business?

Why it matters: MSP consolidation is accelerating. The answer should cover data ownership, portability formats, source-code escrow for any proprietary tooling, and a guaranteed minimum transition window if the relationship terminates.

11 What are your renewal terms, price escalator caps, and exit provisions?

Why it matters: Auto-renewal with uncapped escalators is the single most common contract trap. Defensible terms include capped annual increases (4 to 6%), 90-day non-renewal notice, and clear data egress fees disclosed up front.

12 Can you produce three customer references in my industry and at my scale that I can actually call?

Why it matters: Logo slides are not references. You want named contacts, current customers (not former), and a willingness to put you in direct conversation. Recent references with 18+ months of tenure are the most useful.

SLA BENCHMARKS

What "enterprise-grade" actually looks like in writing.

Tier 1 reflects best-in-class managed cloud performance for mid-market and enterprise workloads. Tier 2 is the floor for production. Anything in the right-hand column should trigger immediate follow-up or removal from the shortlist.

METRIC	UNIT	TIER 1 / BEST-IN-CLASS	TIER 2 / PRODUCTION FLOOR	BELOW TIER / WALK AWAY
Infrastructure Uptime	% annual	≥ 99.99%	≥ 99.95%	< 99.9%
P1 Incident Response	time to engineer	≤ 15 minutes	≤ 30 minutes	> 30 minutes
P1 Resolution Target	time to restore	≤ 4 hours	≤ 8 hours	> 8 hours
Recovery Time Objective (RTO)	DRaaS workloads	≤ 1 hour	≤ 4 hours	> 4 hours
Recovery Point Objective (RPO)	data loss window	≤ 15 minutes	≤ 1 hour	> 1 hour
Time to First Human	P1 phone call	≤ 2 minutes	≤ 5 minutes	> 5 minutes
Service Credit Structure	SLA breach remedy	Tiered, automatic	Flat credit	None / on request

Tier 1 / Best-in-Class Tier 2 / Production Floor Below Tier / Disqualify

A note on uptime math

Three nines (99.9%) of uptime sounds adjacent to four nines (99.99%). It is not. Three nines permits 8 hours 45 minutes of annual downtime; four nines permits 52 minutes. Always confirm the **scope** of the commitment, since "network availability" is not "application availability." A defensible SLA covers the full stack the MSP manages.

RED FLAGS

Ten signals that should disqualify a provider.

Each of these has been observed in real procurement processes. One or two in isolation warrant deeper diligence. Three or more in combination is grounds to walk away regardless of price.

! SLAs not committed in writing

Any uptime or response number that lives only in a slide deck is a wish, not a service level. Demand contract language.

! Cannot name the underlying hardware

A mature MSP can tell you the OEM, model, and refresh cycle of the platform you will run on. Vague answers signal resold capacity.

! "We're on a major hyperscaler"

Used as a substitute for architecture detail. A hyperscaler is not a strategy. Demand the actual design.

! Annual escalators above 7%, uncapped

An MSP confident in retention does not need punitive renewal mechanics. Cap escalators at 4 to 6% with a clear index.

! All references are recent wins

References under 12 months in are sales-cycle artifacts. Insist on at least one customer with 24+ months of tenure.

! Offshore NOC with no escalation path

Geographic location of the NOC is a legitimate question. Ask how a P1 reaches a named senior engineer and how fast.

! No documented IR runbook

If they cannot share a redacted incident response playbook on request, they do not operate one.

! No current attestation reports

SOC 2 Type II, ISO 27001, or PCI DSS attestation should be produced within 48 hours under NDA. Anything longer is a tell.

! 3-year terms with punitive exit

Long contracts paired with onerous termination fees and data egress charges are designed to lock in poor service.

! Vague answers on data ownership

Your data is your data. Portability formats, transition windows, and egress fees should be defined contractually up front.

SCORING RUBRIC

Score each answer. Compare objectively.

Score each of the 12 questions on a 1 to 5 scale using the rubric below. Total scores produce a 12 to 60 point range. Use the bands underneath to interpret the result and drive your shortlist decision.

Per-question scoring scale

1	2	3	4	5
UNACCEPTABLE	**WEAK**	**ACCEPTABLE**	**STRONG**	**EXCEPTIONAL**
No answer, evasive, or contradicts prior claims.	Vague verbal answer, no documentation.	Specific answer, partial documentation.	Specific, documented, contractually backed.	Documented, contractual, plus reference proof.

Total score interpretation (out of 60)

50-60 — **Strong Candidate**
Defensible answers across all four pillars. Move to reference calls and commercial negotiation.

40-49 — **Conditional**
Acceptable foundation with specific gaps. Require remediation in writing before contract.

30-39 — **Significant Gaps**
Proceed only with material concessions, escalation paths, and short initial term.

< 30 — **Disqualify**
Provider is not operating at production maturity. Remove from shortlist regardless of price.

Pro tip. Run this rubric with at least three stakeholders from different parts of the organization (infrastructure, security, finance). The variance in scores between functions is itself a diagnostic. Wide divergence usually means the provider is telling each function what it wants to hear.

COMPLIMENTARY / 30 MINUTES

Have us review your shortlist.

Send us the responses you've collected from your top three MSPs. We will score them against this framework, flag the gaps we'd push back on, and identify the contract language we'd negotiate before signing. No pitch, no obligation.

BOOK AN EVALUATION REVIEW

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ABOUT IT VORTEX

IT Vortex is a Premier Broadcom VCSP Partner and VMware-powered managed cloud provider serving mid-market and enterprise clients. Our service portfolio spans cloud hosting (IaaS), desktop as a service (DaaS), disaster recovery (DRaaS), backup as a service (BaaS), and security as a service (SECaaS). We architect, build, and operate the infrastructure that runs our customers' most important workloads.

CONTACT

Phone	1 (844) 704-0684
Email	info@theitvortex.com
Web	theitvortex.com
Address	237 W Midland Ave Paramus, NJ 07652