

Getting connected 2 | Choosing an Internet Service Provider

This briefing document outlines:

- **Deciding what you want from your Internet Service Provider (ISP)**
- **Finding the right ISP for your business.**

A direct connection to the Internet is too complex and expensive for all but the largest organisations. Instead, an Internet service provider (ISP) acts as a gateway, providing the link between your own computer system and the Internet. An ISP may also host your website, making it permanently accessible to other web users. But you should make your decision carefully. The quality and range of services they offer, and the way they charge, can vary widely. Getting the right ISP is essential if you are going to make the most of the Internet.

Your requirements

The first step to choosing the right ISP is to think about your needs.

Work out your requirements for basic Internet services. You might want an ISP that:

- Allows you to connect to the Internet in a variety of different ways. You might want to connect a single computer, or your entire network. Will you want to connect from outside the office, or even from abroad?
- Provides unlimited email addresses. This is important if you want to give a separate email address to each employee.
- Allows you to use your own domain name (web address) for your website and in your email addresses. Some ISPs will register domain names for you.

Consider the level of speed and reliability you require. Faster access will save you time (but cost more). Your own website must provide a fast service to visitors. Reliability problems can be disruptive and lose you customers.

Think about the level of security you want. Your ISP should have anti-virus software and firewalls to protect your system against hackers. If you have an e-commerce website, your security needs will be higher than if you just want basic Internet access and email.

Assess the degree of technical support you need. Different ISPs provide different levels of support, including:

- Technical support over a free, standard-rate or premium-rate phone line, or by email.
- Free email, Internet browser or basic site design software.
- Additional software or services available for an extra fee. For example, more advanced site design or e-commerce software.

You may prefer to rely on in-house expertise if your employees have the appropriate skills, or you could use independent suppliers.

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Think about your future needs. You will want an ISP that can provide a consistently high standard of service. Having to change ISPs because yours has gone out of business, or become uncompetitive or unreliable, can be disruptive.

Speed

Some ISPs do not support all types of connection. If you want a fast connection, you may find you have a more limited choice. Fast connections include ISDN, ADSL, cable modems and leased lines.

Regardless of the type of connection you have, the speed of Internet access is limited by your ISP's speed. Look for an ISP with:

- A low number of users per channel ('contention ratio'). Ideally, the contention ratio should be no more than 8:1 on standard phone lines. ADSL ratios range from 15–50:1.
- A consistently fast network infrastructure. Make sure the ISP itself has more than one connection to the Internet.

The speed with which your ISP serves up pages of your website is important. If your site is slow, visitors to your website may lose interest and go elsewhere. Generally, visitors should receive your home page within 20 seconds. There are other factors that will affect the speed of your site. For example, the speed of a visitor's own Internet connection and the amount of graphics and the size of files on your site. If you frequently update your website, the speed and ease of uploading changes will also be important.

Some ISPs offer co-location to handle complex websites at speed. A dedicated computer is housed at the ISP's premises, meaning the ISP's computers are not affected. It can be rented from the ISP or can be your own.

Eye to the future

Choose an ISP that will be able to adapt as your needs change and new technologies become available. You may want to change to a faster connection as traffic volumes grow. Use of the Internet and e-commerce is likely to continue to grow. Larger audio and video files are likely to become more common.

You may want to extend your use of the Internet. Customers and suppliers are more and more likely to want to communicate by email. You might want to increase your Internet presence. For example, setting up a company website or selling your products online. Even if e-commerce is not a viable option for you now, it may be in the future.

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Make sure you will be able to take advantage of any new services. Larger, business-oriented ISPs are the most likely to offer the latest services. Disruption to your business will be minimised if you can use your existing ISP to take advantage of any new services.

Choosing your ISP

Decide what services you require. Some ISPs offer their own content, which is only available to subscribers. However, most businesses can find the information they need on the Internet rather than using an ISP's content.

Decide what access you need. Most ISPs offer nationwide access through a low-cost telephone number. Many ISPs have an international presence, allowing you to access their services from other countries (without having to make an international phone call to connect).

Find ISPs that can meet your requirements. Ask for recommendations from contacts with similar needs. Check other sources of help and advice.

Compare costs, including:

- One-off set-up fees.
- Monthly or annual charges.
- Usage fees based on the volume of email traffic and the traffic from your website.
- A charge for web space.
- Charges for design or technical support.

Costs can vary widely, and will depend on the range and quality of service you need. ADSL and fixed-price deals can be very cost-effective for business use.

Investigate which ISPs can provide the standard of service you require. Do they have a good service level agreement? Many ISPs publish information about their current performance – including the speed of core areas of their networks – on their websites.

The contract

Many ISPs offer contracts on a 'take it or leave it' basis. For standard services (e.g. a simple dial-up connection), this may be acceptable to you. You still need to check the agreement. For large or complex uses, key conditions and prices may be negotiable.

Contracts are increasingly flexible. ADSL is available on a three-month contract from many ISPs. Don't be tied in longer than you need to be.

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Make sure any domain names are your property. If you need to change your ISP, you will want to retain the same domain names. Check the ISP uses reputable domain name registries. For example, Nominet (<http://www.nominet.org.uk>) for .uk domain names. Make sure that domain registrations clearly state that your company is the owner of the domain. Ask your ISP to give you the domain registration certificate.

Focus on what will happen if there are problems. A good, business-oriented ISP will offer a service level agreement setting out what you can expect. For example, the maximum amount of time the ISP's own computers can be out of action each month, and a response time to deal with any problems you have. A service level agreement should also state the compensation you will get if service falls below the specified standards.

Help and advice

Visit the Internet Service Providers Association's (ISPA) website at <http://www.ispa.org.uk> Members of ISPA sign up to an industry code of practice that covers areas including quality of service and pricing.

Your existing IT experts or advisers may be able to help you. If you are investing significantly in your web presence, it may be worth paying a consultant to help you select the best ISP. The British Computer Society can provide names of consultants. Call 01793 417424 or visit the website at www1.bcs.org.uk and click on Advice.

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