

What to prioritise when deciding on a business broadband provider

With dozens of providers jostling for your organisation's business connectivity, it can be extremely confusing to settle on one broadband package. Very often price seems like the only distinguishing factor, as providers all promise the earth. However, there are factors that set vendors apart in this highly competitive sphere, and careful consideration of these points will make the difference between a satisfying experience, and a frustrating one that is constrained by opaque after-the-fact limitations and exclusions.



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Just who is providing your internet?

Less than a decade ago, internet connectivity options were limited in South Africa, and carrier pigeon stunts were used to demonstrate the slow speed of local broadband. Today, fortunately, South African internet access has come of age – in performance, accessibility and pricing. Both businesses and home users are spoilt for choice in an area that appears to be becoming commoditised. With fibre lines starting to spread nationwide, beyond the boundaries of the country's major metros, internet service providers are even increasingly speaking to customers in smaller towns.

Look at the ISP partners listed on the website of any South African fibre infrastructure provider and you'll see dozens of home-user packages from dozens of providers that look largely indistinguishable. Connectivity solutions for companies are much the same. And in such a crowded, competitive space, differentiation often falls to pricing; the freebie inclusion of extras like hardware and installation; and promised high-speed line performance.

Again, this seems like a win for the customer, until they realise that the too-good-to-be-true contract they signed is often that. Today's ISP arena is jam-packed with players of all sizes, and many of the smaller providers operate by reselling bandwidth from their Tier 1 equivalents – large-scale ISPs who connect directly to global networks.

These Tier 1 providers are in turn reliant on innovation- and infrastructure-centric “Tier 0” providers, like Seacom, who own and operate subsea cable infrastructure and connect the internet to all key content and compute power, essentially acting as ISPs to the major ISPs and bringing the power of the global internet into the country.

The point is that smaller providers at the end of this bandwidth provision chain may offer an enticing deal, but in many instances their Internet access could be highly contended. In other words, they might apply restrictions to their customers if their own allocated bandwidth from higher tier providers becomes compromised through over-subscription. Alternatively, they may rely on the data expiry model, banking on the possibility that their customers won't use the full allocation every month.

Scrutinise the small print

There are few greater frustrations for a company operating in the digital age than to be locked into an internet contract that is failing to meet their business needs. Snail-paced, soft capped connectivity when you're trying to access your cloud-based business solutions at peak times can cripple an enterprise. ISPs often get away with this kind of under-delivery though if the customer signed a contract with heavy breakage penalties.

Key here is to read any Service Level Agreement and Service Level Description with extreme care. Look out especially for fair usage and abuse clauses that allow the ISP to “shape” uncapped connections, prioritise certain types of traffic, or otherwise throttle connectivity as needed on their side. As soon as you spot any red flags in the contract wording, raise them with the sales agent.

This said, first prize for business owners and decision-makers is to enter into a relationship with an ISP that can offer legitimately unshaped and uncapped Internet access, because they own and operate the underlying infrastructure that supports it. Even better is an ISP with a diverse selection of customisable, scalable connectivity options to better fit your organisation's requirements and budget.

It's about more than speed and price

With speed and price used so often as market differentiators, it's easy to place too much importance on them when making a connectivity decision. This is particularly true when speed is really only measurable after you have signed a contract and have been using the service for a while.

However, they are only two aspects of the larger ISP experience. When choosing truly dependable broadband solutions for your business, it's essential to look at everything that comes included with your connection and contract. And we're not talking hardware and physical infrastructure. Think intangibles instead.

For example, 24/7 customer support is easily forgotten until there's a crisis. How easy is it to get in touch with your ISP if your broadband has flatlined? Do you trust them to resolve the issue and keep you updated of progress? At the same time,

it's essential to know if your ISP has resiliency measures in place should there be any disruptions to the core service.

Finally, there's the issue of security. While every organisation should prioritise their own cyber-protection, the mark of a superior ISP today is one that acknowledges the increasingly dangerous threat landscape of the Internet and includes solutions, such as cloud-facilitated endpoint protection, that can be bolted on to connectivity for additional peace of mind.

In fact, an overarching industry trend gaining traction is for ISPs to offer "full-package" product and service support as part of their subscription agreement. This kind of approach to business solutions, combining flexibility with all-in-one bundling, is especially convenient for organisations that may not have the time or resources to manage all these aspects individually. It's also a sign that the ISP customer experience is evolving, as much for business decision-makers as home users.

Ultimately, your number one priority when choosing broadband connectivity is to find an ISP that works with you to enable your business's growth, instead of limiting it.

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