

Barrister to techs: if you want to get paid sooner, you will pay

Contributed by Rick Savoia
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Barrister Global Services has done it again. They've devised another scheme to keep more of the money they owe to their techs for services performed. However, this time there's a twist: it's on the promise of faster payment.

Barrister, which claims to be "the oldest and largest woman-owned computer service company in the United States", is a national contractor based in Louisiana. The company was founded 1972 and advertises a network of 15,000 techs on the roster who are independent contractors. The company is well established and is well known among field service technicians and IT consultants as a source of contract work.

Years ago Barrister had a fairly solid reputation as a good national for perform work for and was known for timely payments. After hurricane Katrina hit the state in 2005, all of that changed. Barrister is a different company now and its reputation among techs has changed along with it.

Service Providers who work or have performed work for Barrister during the last few years report a number of frustrating issues with the company, including poor communication, lack of support and poor customer service. The biggest issue, though, is slow payment for services rendered - or no payment at all.

Barrister promises to pay techs 21 days after the service order is closed (to Barrister's satisfaction). The payment is typically sent by check and mailed to the tech via regular US mail. Unfortunately, techs frequently find themselves waiting months for payment and some have had to expend considerable time, energy and money trying to collect by whatever means necessary, including legal recourse.

This hasn't deterred Barrister from finding any excuse to slow payment or avoid it altogether. The company has created a specific set of requirements for properly closing calls with threat of non-payment for not following the steps correctly. It uses the typical delay tactics such the old "we never received the fax" or "we have no record the core parts were returned" and, of course, "the check is in the mail" lines; old-style, but tried-and-true shell games played by other nationals with less than stellar reputations in the industry.

However, lately the company has come up with more creative ways to avoid payment or get back some, if not all of the money they pay out to techs (when they do pay). What is disturbing is that these new tactics not only put the techs at a financial disadvantage, each successive scheme puts them at an even greater risk than the last of losing more than just the money owed.

Early this week techs contracted to perform onsite service calls for Barrister received an e-mail announcing a new "SpeedPay" service. According to the e-mail, this new service provides faster payment to techs via direct deposit to their bank accounts within seven days after successfully closing the service call, instead of the usual 21. On the surface, this seems like a good idea, shorter processing time, faster delivery, easier access to funds. But there's a catch. Actually, there are two.

You have to pay for it. And it's not cheap.

Barrister requires a fee for SpeedPay that is equal to 20% of the total invoice. Twenty percent! It means that the higher the ticket, the more you have to pay. This isn't just a transaction fee, it's a penalty for receiving payment due.

This is not the first time Barrister has tried to separate techs from the money owed them. Last February the company launched its Quality Initiative program, which assessed a penalty for techs who arrived to an onsite service call late. The fee? One hundred dollars, an amount that was often more than the value of the work order itself. I blogged about it in Barrister to bill service providers \$100 for tardiness - techs are ticked .

Granted, tardiness on the job affects all parties involved. If I were a national contractor, I would be concerned about it as well. But a hundred dollars? That's not just a penalty, it's another source of revenue.

Now the tactic has shifted from penalizing techs for tardiness to penalizing them for trying to collect on the work order. That's an entirely different approach, and for the tech, it's worse.

It sounds somewhat incredible that a company which owes you money will charge you to collect from them, but here it is, in all it's slimy arrogance. In case you don't believe me, here is the entire e-mail below:Dear :

We recently conducted a survey of our technician base and many technicians requested an option to be paid faster on

work completed.

As a result, Barrister is proud to announce our SpeedPay program.

This program will give all technicians, at the time of dispatch, the ability to choose their payment terms – either standard 21 days or 7 days via ACH (excluding Bank Holidays).

***The days between completion and payment start counting once all steps required to close a work order have been completed. These include, but are not limited to:

- Call into Barrister Call center to close call from site.
- Fax/scan and email signed RFS to Barrister for processing.
- Provide return tracking numbers for all cores .
- Return all parts within Barrister stated guidelines.
- Complete any other customer specific instructions as directed by your dispatcher or the RFS.

Please note that ACH payment is only available via the Speedpay program at this time. Barrister anticipates that ACH will be available for standard payment terms in the 3rd quarter of 2010, but that is only an estimate at this time. Without Speedpay, payments will only be sent via US Mail.

In exchange for the 7 day payment, Barrister will withhold 20% of the payment typically made to you.

For example, you accept a \$45.00 work order and choose speed pay. Once all work is complete as described above, Barrister will issue an ACH payment to your account 7 days later, excluding bank holidays. This payment will be for \$36.00.

If you accepted the same call and chose standard payment terms, your check for \$45.00 will be mailed to you 21 days following call completion as described above. This will be sent via US mail only.

These accelerated payment terms are offered as requested by Technicians and to assist with cash flow. These terms can be selected per dispatch, so it can be changed as needed. However, once a work order is dispatched the options cannot be changed.

In order to be eligible for this program, we will need you to log in to your TechWA account and provide us with your bank routing and account number. If you do not have a login for TechWA, please email techwas.signup@barrister.com. Please let us know if you have any questions. I had a few questions, so after confirming the e-mail from multiple techs I called Barrister to ask them. I was not granted access to anyone with authority to comment on the e-mail. A representative who answered the phone said he was aware of the program but did not have enough information to answer my questions. No one else was available to answer them and so far voice mail has provided no return calls. Reaction from Service Providers was negative. "20% for faster pay?" wrote Frank De Leon of Frank's Computer Shop in the OnForce forums. "I do not think I have done a job for them in at least a year because normal pay was so bad now they want to pay even less. " "For as long as Barristers has been so horrible- how is it possible they can still conduct business at all?", someone posted on TFF forums. "It's got to be extremely hard for them to find techs to actually do the work which, in turn, means they've got to be losing contracts all the time for failure to perform." "From what I have read online it is the techs that continue to take the work. Some were into Barristers for \$15K.", another tech posted. "Sorry I cant see letting myself get that deep into a biz that doesnt have AAA rating." Barrister currently has a B rating with the Better Business Bureau. There are a fair amount of comments by both customers and techs alike on various complaint boards on the Internet, a lot of which is not complimentary. Google Barrister Global Services and you will find them. You can read more about Barrister, including information about its known history, location and reputation in The Force Field forums . Now, I mentioned there were two catches. The first one, the 20% fee, is obvious. The second is more subtle, but potentially more dangerous. They want your ACH information. They want access to your bank account. Generally, ACH access is not one-way. When you give someone ACH authorization you give them the ability to deposit money directly to your bank account. You could also potentially give someone the ability to withdraw money at will.

I covered this in a segment in one of the Special Edition episodes of The Force Field podcast. I want to reiterate it here. Never give ACH access to a national contractor, especially a company you have reservations about doing business with. This is a risky and potentially dangerous thing to do. Bounced checks are one thing. Access to the contents of your bank account is something else entirely. Of course, ACH transactions are not free. There is generally a small charge associated ACH transactions and for companies who offer Direct Payments to their customers it averages about 12 cents per transaction, according to electronicpayments.org . Barrister charges 20% of the amount of the transaction. On a \$45 work order it's not twelve cents. It's nine dollars! That isn't a transaction fee, it is a junk fee and that is just slimy. Personally, given Barrister's current reputation and shady tactics, I wouldn't give them ACH access no matter how fast it is, but that's just me. If you do work for Barrister and are willing to pay 20% for payment in seven days (as they claim), do it at your own risk. You have been warned.

