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Keeping the organization up and running by Mark Lillycrop

Business continuity, business availability - whatever you want call it, it's big business! Over the last year, companies of all shapes and sizes have begun to realize how vulnerable their everyday processes are to unexpected failure or attack. Indeed, in many smaller companies, availability issues are being discussed for the very first time.

This heightened sense of exposure is not just because of world terrorist activity, though that has clearly changed everyone's perception of the everyday risks we face. It's also because, bit by bit, we have made our customers almost entirely reliant on technology by automating the channel of communication between them and us. Each business process, be it an order placed via the Web, an invoice prepared or inventory item tracked, or a telephone query to a call center which passes through an interactive voice recognition system on the way, depends on 100% availability of our core IT systems.

What's more, we have actively encouraged those same customers to expect (and accept nothing less than) a 24x7 service. We have all conspired to create a culture where customer loyalty is measured in the number of seconds they are prepared to wait before they surf off to the next supplier or slam down the phone in disgust. And the problem with customer expectations is that they only go in one direction - up. During the heyday of e-business, this was not such a problem. We could all see the potential of the Internet to support a brave new trading environment, and the IT vendors were more than happy to remind us that improved service levels and increased performance were just a checkbook signature



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away. So many things have happened in the last year to shake business confidence, but whatever set-backs the commercial world has experienced, it still has to satisfy the same customer service demands – or face the grim alternatives.

In recent months, the corporate world has woken up the fact that business continuity and commercial survival are synonymous. At the same time, it has become clear that this is no longer simply a data center issue. Going back a few years, business continuity boiled down to disaster recovery and back-up procedures. In a mainframe-centric environment, these concepts were well understood. Within the confines of a traditional storage/database hierarchy, the tools available were more than adequate for restoring lost data and applications within a 'reasonable' period of time, and service level agreements (SLAs) made sure that sufficient resources were devoted to this process.

That was yesterday's scenario. The challenge now is to examine every core business function and to consider the impact of uncontrolled downtime on each of those activities. This is truly an organization-wide activity, involving the highest level of management. Indeed, it goes far beyond the edge of the organization, and involves a whole host of network service providers, co-location companies, business partners etc. Some of these suppliers may appear to be rock solid and equal to the most demanding SLAs; but recent accounting events in the business world have shown just how easy it can be for these rocks to be shaken to dust - and then what is the SLA worth? CEOs, and their appointed business availability chiefs and consultants, need to be addressing a whole series of questions, including:

- how long does a particular application need to be down before my business is seriously affected?



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- assuming that a complete data recovery exercise is complex and time-consuming, how much of my data needs to be recovered to get me up and running again?
- if my data is undamaged, but my staff no longer have an office, how do they access the information?
- if I can recover, but the business partner I rely on so heavily stays down, how do I proceed?
- if I understand mainframe-style disaster recovery, how do I apply it to other platforms?

This last point is particularly relevant to operational and technical support professionals in the enterprise. So many companies have disaster recovery procedures in place on the mainframe, but nowhere else. Yet most of these businesses have a mixture of systems in place, which routinely interoperate and share data. Take down just one of those systems and the chances are that the data and applications running on the others will be severely impacted. So the disciplines governing mainframe disaster recovery have to be extended to other platforms if we are to stand a chance of keeping our mission-critical applications up and running.

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