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Planning for the Worst

The ABCs of Business-continuity Planning

Although the specifics of any service provider's business-continuity plan will depend heavily on the specific nature of the customer's business and requirements, there are several elements that must be addressed in all such plans.

If you have done your work up front, you'll know how much downtime your processes can tolerate — a critical factor in spelling out the type of redundancy your service provider's operations should have. For example, critical applications might need a hot backup site where data is backed up hourly, whereas less-critical applications might do with cold or warm sites. The criticality of data and processes might also dictate whether the business-continuity plan allows for simply a site-outage plan or a city and country-outage plan as well — a plan that would move operations to a different city or country in case of disaster.

"If you're sending an application offshore that needs to run 24x7, an hour of downtime could cause a critical failure in your business. You have to know what you need to protect against that, and make sure it's in the business-continuity plan," says Semerdjian

A country-outage plan might have prevented the difficulties that Tata Consultancy Services, a global service provider, encountered when China was hit by the SARS epidemic about five years ago.

"When we started doing work in China, we used a standard business-continuity plan when SARS hit. With a country-outage plan, we could have flown all 200 workers to a backup country," says Abid Ali, GM, Global Delivery, TCS, Mumbai, India.

But before making plans to include city or country-outage plans, make sure your processes are critical enough to warrant it, notes Ali, because the cost of such plans are much higher than those of site-outage plans.

In addition to making provisions to preserve the infrastructure of the operation, a service provider's business-continuity plan must also address the issue of people, such as ensuring that substitute workers with enough knowledge of the applications and processes can take over when needed or that existing workers can be transferred to another location.

"A lot of offshore providers have the personnel such that if a group of people have been working on a project and can't get there, a backup group of people with equal expertise can step in," says Semerdjian. "In that case, the transfer of knowledge between the primary and backup personnel becomes very important."

Yet another key element of a good business-continuity plan is preparing for telecommunications and networking outages. For instance, a network line might go down because of a power outage to a key city, which might cause the entire process to slow or even stop altogether. These possibilities dictate that a service provider's business-continuity plan stipulates an alternative means of communication to be used as needed.

Although the laws of the country in which the service provider operates don't seem to be much of an impediment to business continuity, the regulations the customer itself must comply with, can have a direct impact on the operations. A U.S. company subject to HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) or the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, for example, must ensure that any organization handling personal data of any type, protect it as directed by relevant regulations. Those provisions aren't loosened in the event of a disaster.

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