z/Bottom Line

Avoiding Disaster

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Writing this column for *z/Journal* is always an adventure in creativity. But this month's column was an inspired exception. Written on a train en route from New York City to Albany, the car I was traveling in started to fill with smoke at a train stop. Looking out the window, we saw Amtrak personnel, working feverishly with fire extinguishers. The problem was there was no one on board to tell the passengers what to do. So, we all asked each other what to do. We knocked on the window to get the employees' attention, but to no avail. Finally, with smoke threatening and anxiety building, we made the decision to open an emergency exit and file out.

Recalling the irony of writing a column titled "Avoiding Disaster" at a customer meeting the next day, the CIO told me he thought my experience was apropos regarding Disaster Recovery (DR). "You can have the procedures, the equipment and the facilities in place," said Mike Thibdeau, CIO of Davis Vision, Inc., "but unless there's a good communications plan directing those resources and the teams, recovery is threatened."

In the last several weeks, I've had discussions with IT management from a broad variety of environments, both in the public and private sectors. There was one issue repeated by nearly all the organizations that was most startling to hear, and the dread in the voices of those telling the story was only eclipsed by the objective reality of their words: As far as DR for their IT environment is concerned, they feel they are poised for disaster.

With the events of the last few years, it's unfathomable that so many are unprepared. But heading into 2005, why are so many struggling with IT survivability in the event of a business interruption that should be so obviously possible?

Universally, their answers distilled down to a similar problem. The same network computing environment that brought us the ubiquity of connectivity and accelerated the proliferation of data across multiple platforms also has made the unthinkable, at least for now, unrecoverable. Mainframe shops have managed this process with success for the last four decades, always with an eye on continuing the operation. But their process was "obvious," meaning you could quantify and identify all the data, applications, and skills necessary to be replicated.

The network computing environment is simply too fluid and dynamic for many companies to keep up with. Many don't even try. But they ignore the issue to their organization's peril.

Technology seemed to make a difference in the shops we found that felt they did have a comprehensive and workable plan in place. One example was VMware from VMware, Inc.

Recently acquired by EMC, VMware provides many of the same benefits for Intel server environments that z/VM delivers for the mainframe. VMware allows multiple, disparate Intel operating system images to be booted under its "hypervisor" control, while insulating each "Virtual Machine" from hardware differences. Each complete image is actually just a disk file, which can literally be copied, cut, and pasted across servers anywhere in a network and then immediately booted. While VMware is aimed at providing other benefits, chiefly server consolidation on typically underutilized servers, the DR benefits are compelling because of these features. Hot sites now need relatively few servers. And because they don't have a one-to-one physical relationship, there is no requirement to update the redundant site each time a production "server" is added. The insulation of hardware differences allows, for example, a Dell RAID server environment to easily boot in an IBM non-RAID environment. Add in the ability to simply restore a single disk file as a means of spawning a critical server and all of these capabilities greatly simplify disaster recovery.

Another discipline we found in the cases of the "recoverable" shops included technology from Citrix, Inc. Citrix's products spawn each unique desktop environment on a server, so the user's PC becomes nothing more than a screen, a keyboard, and a mouse. All processing actually takes place on the server, but the users don't perceive any difference. Once again, this technology is aimed at filling other gaps such as ease of administration, software deployment, and reuse of older client hardware. But the main benefit from a DR standpoint is consolidation of data in a central location. This means there is *certainty* that all critical data is accounted for and backed up in accordance with normal operation.

Multiple systems on one server to reduce hardware complexity—consolidation of data in a known central location—what interesting mainframe concepts! As the certain and seemingly necessary proliferation of network servers continues, using these types of approaches could spell the difference in survivability in times of recovery.

And coupled with a certain and rehearsed communications plan, as Mike Thibdeau contributed, could spell the difference between smoke and fire.

And that's the z/Bottom Line. **Z**

About the Author

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