



**Maintenance Perspectives**  
Ways to get more from your hardware agreements

## **Restoration from the Ruins: Hardware and the facts of catastrophic system failure**

March 15, 2011

**Keep an eye out for typos.**

Details are at the bottom of this newsletter's content.

### **Accommodation vs. Prevention**

The importance of solid security, risk management and risk prevention programs can't be overstated. Preparation, testing, redundant backups and constant improvement are critical to the safety and possibly the survival of your data and by extension, your company.

But then sometimes, there's an 8.9 earthquake. Or a tsunami. Sometimes, in fact, there are both.

Rare, certainly; unthinkable in your location, quite possibly. Nevertheless there is a category of catastrophe that not only goes beyond the existing safety nets and redundancies, it actually exceeds the imaginations of the human beings involved in planning for such things. In short, there are disasters that are preventable - data theft, viral infection, etc - and there are those that must simply be accommodated: Massive national disasters, total political collapses, national-scale nuclear accidents.

At times unpreventable disasters are so extreme that simply surviving should be considered success; but these events are of such a monstrous scale that they affect every economy to some extent, and may pull down companies thousands of miles from the epicenter of a given event simply because of the interconnectedness of the global market.

As the people of Japan begin to salvage what they can from the wreckage that remains, there are ample lessons for business managers and IT professionals around the world to take to heart. None of these are necessarily new, but all of them are critical reminders that a false sense of security alone makes for a woefully insufficient risk management strategy.

### **10 things to think about**

1. Rain is not the only source of water. You may not live near the ocean, but you may live near a reservoir that may fail in a hurricane or earthquake. More importantly, consider unexpected disaster vectors.
2. If you need your server location barcodes in order to find your data or even the identity of assets in the datacenter, any long-term outage will have disproportionately serious effects. You need a system that can get critical information into the hands of people who need it even if the power is out or the servers are down.
3. Catastrophe may well involve much more than your location. Electricity, access to the internet, phones, transportation and other scarcities may be pervasive over both distance and time. What is the procedure if one or more is unavailable for a prolonged period?
4. Plans are good but simulations are better. Follow simulated catastrophes out to their simulated end - and can you simulate the response of the insurance company? Of your legal team?
5. Power, cooling, hardware and software alone can't run any business. Any number of events from national disaster to a major snowstorm can deprive your business of much of its staff, at least temporarily. Though unpleasant to consider, an emergency plan for managing with a reduced staff is preferable to turning everyone out.
6. Critical resources can become impossibly critical after a major disaster.
7. Interconnection can be an advantage or a drawback. If your provider fails, you're more vulnerable. If you fail, those you provide service or products to are more vulnerable.
8. Businesses can be heroes too. In the event of a major disaster, your business may be able to provide critical services, or even shelter.
9. Being able to improvise turns out to be a more important skill than being able to stick to a (failed) plan. Accept that you didn't think of everything and break down the plan into parts that can still operate individually if something unravels or has to be modified in a real event.
10. Take comfort that even major disasters are rare and limited in physical area, but don't use that alone for a backup plan. Panic isn't the result of a disaster; it's the result of being forced to make a decision without a viable plan - so speaking unexpectedly at a conference can incite more panic than a fire in the hotel.

Far from being the sole purview of rigid bean-counters, risk management (for hardware and otherwise) is best handled by creative thinkers who are free to suggest and anticipate the unexpected. Cultivate your inner paranoia and fondness for worst-case scenarios, and work with vendors and providers who do the same, to be much better prepared in the event of a real catastrophe.

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