



PULLING THE PLUG ON TELECOMS BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Feeling confident that your business continuity plan covers everything? Then pull the plug on your telephone system and see what happens, says Graham Chick, chief executive, GemaTech.

According to the latest research 69% of organisations in the UK now have some form of business continuity plan. But how many of those plans actually work? Have they been, and are being regularly tested? Are they proven in a variety of potential disaster scenarios?

Unlikely. When it comes to the critical telephony system, too many organisations are mistakenly turning to the perceived reliability of a VoIP solution or planning to use mobile phones, despite clear evidence that such solutions are far from robust. Furthermore those organisations that have opted for the expensive and inflexible business continuity plans offered by the major carriers more often than not cannot afford the cost of testing.

The only way to prove whether or not a business continuity plan will work is to test it. So how many businesses are prepared to pull the plug on their own telephone network (by disabling their PBX) to discover just how robust their business continuity plan would be in the event of a real emergency?

Continuity Demand

An increasingly fearful and risk aware business community has, finally, realised the need for business continuity planning. This realisation has been aided in part by government regulation – such as the Civil Contingencies Act which demands that local authorities have contingency planning, emergency planning and business continuity management solutions in place.

The problem is that many of these plans remain untested. In the event of a disaster, from data corruption to the failure of the telephone system, organisations have absolutely no idea whether or not the plan will work.

For example, those relying on a dual system of telephone and VoIP communication are in for a rude awakening: VoIP is not a reliable form of communication and cannot be used as a fail-safe option for the telephone.

So what would happen in the event of a failure of the telephone system? In a major disaster the mobile network is immediately swamped, taking that option out of the equation. Even in a less severe situation, while employees can use their mobile devices how will customers contact the organisation for the hour, day, even week the telephone system is down?

Inflexible Response

Of course the carriers do offer business continuity options, primarily for expensive non-geographic numbers but also a limited solution for geographic numbers. But the cost of these solutions is extortionate. Indeed one UK blue chip financial services company pays in excess of £100,000 per year for a business continuity solution for its telephone system. Unfortunately it cannot justify the £28,000 it would cost to test the system – so the investment remains unproven.

Furthermore these solutions are completely lacking in the flexibility required to manage the multiplicity of situations that could cause an invocation. One option is to have the carrier intelligently reroute all calls to specific DDIs from one exchange to another and on to a hot / recovery site. However this is again an extremely expensive option. and in the event of a major disaster few organisations will want to send the entire staff to another site, the cost would simply be prohibitive.

An option from one of the carriers offers the rerouting of a limited number of DDIs to specific numbers – typically 20 or 25 from any consecutive block of number. This

enables the business continuity plan to support the specific needs of senior personnel for example, rerouting to a home number, mobile or alternative site. At a cost of £4,000 set up fee and £4,000 per annum per set of numbers, large organisations are investing hugely simply to attain the rerouting of numbers for key personnel.

Unfortunately these solutions are hard coded in advance – and require some 14 days notice to be changed. But in any actual disaster, how many people are actually in the place precoded in the plan? People are off sick, abroad on business or holiday, or have even left the company.

Given the inflexibility and high cost of typical telephone business continuity plans, it is little wonder that so many remain untested.

Flexible Business

Businesses need a far more flexible, responsive solution to cope with the numerous situations that can arise. Is it really realistic to evacuate every employee from the affected building to another site when the problem is limited to one floor of the office building simply because the telephone business continuity solution is all or nothing?

An inability to support partial invocations is a major business problem – and cost; an issue that would be very apparent if organisations were adequately testing not just whether or not the business continuity plan works but its business viability.

It is only by regular testing that an organisation can discover the constraints imposed by business continuity plans and ascertain whether or not the constraint is an acceptable compromise. This is particularly key for the telephony system which underpins every aspect of business communication.

Rather than relying on a hard coded, finite rerouting of a select few DDIs, organisations actually need a range of flexible plans that offer unlimited individual DDI rerouting in

response to specific disasters. This can range from partial invocation to complete rerouting of every number in the company to any number of alternative locations. Furthermore, by placing the ability to reroute numbers in the hands of the organisation itself, rather than the carrier entrusted with the delivery of the incoming calls businesses can manage the situation on the fly, flexibly changing the plan as circumstances dictate.

False Promise

As business continuity awareness grows, management are becoming increasingly conscious of the need for robust telecommunications support. But too many are bemused by the technical complexity of the solution. And given the increasing belief that, somehow, the adoption of VoIP will be the answer to their prayers as contingency, that bemusement could result in a major business problem.

For one, in excess of 80% of all Internet traffic in the UK passes through one building – should that building be compromised the implications for all UK businesses relying on the Internet let alone VoIP would be appalling. Secondly, the contention on business use for VoIP over the public Internet is some 20 to one, but few people realise that there is also contention on the number of voice “transactions” (number of phone calls that can be initiated). In the event of a disaster VoIP will either slow down to a stop or users will be unable to access it at all. And thirdly, most VoIP solutions are dependent upon some kind of underground cable, and hence vulnerable to external damage.

So, if the telecoms manager insists that the company’s telephony system is completely reliable in the event of any disaster, suggest it is unplugged – in a planned fashion – and then judge just how confidence inspiring is the response?

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