

Disaster Recovery Services: Questions to Ask of a Service Provider

Interactive's Engineering Director Clint Seagrave looks at the key criteria for selecting a disaster recovery service provider

With increasing dependence on systems availability, the recovery of your core servers, applications and network are fundamental in the event of a disaster. In fact, as organisations rely more and more on 'anytime, anywhere' connectivity, 'systems availability' has become synonymous with 'disaster recovery'.

According to industry analyst Gartner, "two out of five enterprises that experience a disaster go out of business within five years. Business continuity plans and disaster recovery services ensure continuity and viability." (Disaster Recovery Plans and Systems are Essential, September 2001)

This article discusses your considerations when selecting a service provider to deliver disaster recovery services – a partner on whom the very survival of your business may depend.

Focus and Expertise

When reviewing your options for disaster recovery services, the pedigree of potential providers is vital. Here are some key questions to ask:

- What is their core business? If it is the sale of hardware or software, or the supply of Internet or telecommunications services, systems availability will be a secondary consideration – an 'add-on' to other services or products.
- How many specialist engineers will be available to help you during the short window you require to get your systems up and running again?
- In helping you develop an appropriate disaster recovery plan, will they be more concerned with selling you additional servers or communications links, rather than formulating a cost-effective, multi-subscriber solution that complies with your corporate risk strategy?

Your best choice is an organisation focussed on systems availability, dedicated to the up-time of your key business systems, and with the technical expertise, facilities, economies of scale and procedures to deliver timely disaster recovery in an emergency.

Response

When a disaster occurs, time is of the essence.

- How long will you have to wait before you become eligible to make use of your disaster recovery service provider's facilities?

- Then, once they accept a 'declared disaster', how long will it take to have your systems functional?

- And can they provide examples of disaster declarations and how quickly they responded to bring the affected business applications back online?

Look for a provider who can guarantee to have facilities available to you within a maximum of 12 hours – and with proven methodologies and the resources available to assist you in the rapid restoration of your business operations. These include the speed with which they can restore your data onto disaster recovery servers, availability of technology to propagate your standard operating environment onto their workstations, and access to sufficient experienced engineers to help get you up and running again.

Affordable Disaster Recovery

The strategy you choose to protect your business in the event of disaster will inevitably reflect a balance between risk and cost.

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Many mid-sized businesses cannot justify the cost of real-time application replication, when these applications can be recovered using a multi-subscriber solution within their desired recovery window. Other organisations, however, require instantaneous recovery of applications to meet their disaster recovery strategies.

Your ideal service provider will offer a full range of solutions – customised to your specific requirements – from the premium option of housing live systems mirrored in real-time, to economical access to multi-subscriber equipment. If some of your applications are more critical than others, perhaps a combination of both solutions will satisfy both your risk and cost objectives.

The fee structure your service provider offers is also a factor:

- Do they require upfront payment for the entire contract period?
- Will you be faced with additional cost if you declare a disaster, or do they include a period of free use of their facilities?
- And are the days you require for regular testing of your disaster recovery plan included in your monthly subscription?

Facilities

Important considerations when choosing a service provider are the facilities for your staff within the disaster recovery centre.

- If the worst happens, and you lose access to key premises for an extended period, can your service provider cope?
- If you need to divert your customer contact centre, can the service provider offer necessary telephony equipment and switchboard functionality?
- And will key staff remain committed during the duration of the outage? Factors such as security, parking, kitchen facilities and access to public transport and amenities all come into the equation.

When choosing between a vendor and an independent service provider, questions you should ask include:

- Can they support multiple platforms? If your key applications rely on systems from a range of vendors, can just one of those vendors provide effective disaster recovery services?
- And are replacement servers proactively maintained by experts and supported by spare parts holdings in the same capital city – or do they represent a storage facility for redundant equipment offering ‘best effort’ recovery?

Another important consideration is the ability of your service provider to deliver in the event of a disaster scenario affecting your multi-tenanted building, street, city block or even the entire suburb. Where will you come in the pecking order if your provider has committed to providing disaster recovery services to your neighbours? In the next article in this series, we look at how to mitigate your risks in such an event.

For information on Interactive's disaster recovery services, visit www.interactive.com.au

