Avoiding Unnecessary Downtime

How to secure your risk, execute your response plan, and reduce incident occurrence

As we step further into the era of accelerated digital transformation and fundamentally change how we're working, selling, and communicating with our customers, unplanned downtime can have catastrophic consequences impacting productivity, revenue, brand image, employee morale, and customer experience. According to Gartner the average cost of network downtime is $5,600 per min. The actual amounts, of course, will vary depending on the size of the company and reliance on digital channels and automation, but extremes can easily range from a nuisance to $1M per hour. However, even without a quantification, the imperative for IT stability is increasingly important.

Sleepless nights should be reserved for cocktail parties and newborns NOT worrying about an outage.

During a severe outage, organizations traditionally find themselves taking a reactive approach by allocating a disproportionate number of resources to "Fire Fighting" and problem management. This is a natural reaction to an in-the-moment crisis but is also expensive and disruptive. Changing from a "Fire Fighting" mentality involves having the identification, prioritization, and mitigation models in place so that you can drive to a proactive approach that measures risks against cost and anticipates points of failure solving for future problems today.
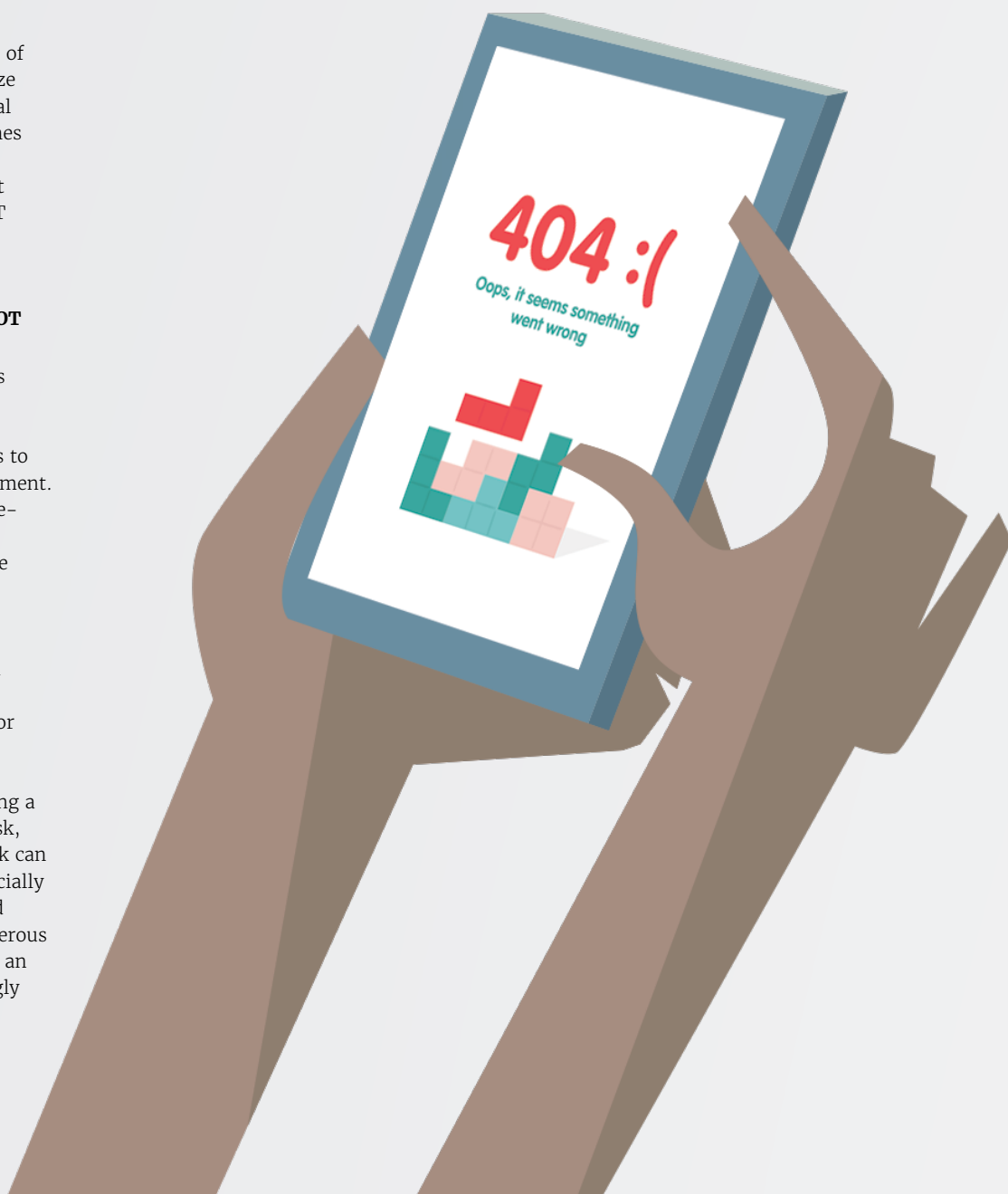
Building a 100 percent resilient environment is costly, however, having a keen view of weak points, areas of risk, areas of unknown, and acceptable risk can help drive prioritization. This is especially the case in environments where rapid growth has been experienced or numerous acquisitions have been made, leaving an infrastructure that is often increasingly fractured and bespoke.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Do you understand your risk profile?

How effective are you during an outage?

How certain are you that an incident won't occur again?

Below are the steps you can take to de-risk your downtime, improve the speed of resolution, and drive lessons learned from each incident, regardless if you are managing your systems and infrastructure yourself or through a third party.

UNDERSTAND YOUR RISKS

Identifying contributors to downtime is the first step in reducing risk. Understanding your company's IT Infrastructure maturity level and risk profile will allow you to take the necessary steps to strengthen your IT legacy estate. This can be done through a risk assessment that compares areas of risk against business requirements.

Align business risk against historical causes of failure, categorizing previous failures by type to understand known areas of improvement. Failure types could include:

Design Audit
Review network architecture to understand single points of failure and weak points such as placement of end of life equipment. Map SLA's to business requirements.
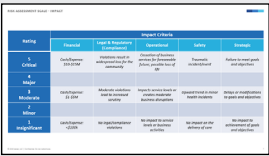
Configuration Audit
Review all configurable devices and confirm that they are set up correctly and configured. Confirm that standard mirroring configurations are in place and if not, understand why.

Audit Inventory
Audit inventory to determine circuit, assets, software versions, and patches. Document SLA's, locations, and maintenance procedures.

Supplier Contracts Review
Check with suppliers to see if you are getting what you paid for and service levels match expectations. If you are paying extra for resiliency, ask for proof. Cross reference against performance and audit suppliers for compliance.

Review ITIL
Check your ITIL processes and ensure that they are being performed correctly. Ensure there is an accountable owner assigned. Hold problem management accountable for feeding back lessons learned and the feedback loop is closed.

A thorough risk review will give you a landscape of your environment that can then be used to prioritize areas of resolution against your business risk.

Risk Assessment – Rating Scale
As a part of the Risk Assessment, understanding all potential failure modes, causes, and impacts will allow you to appropriately measure and prioritize risk mitigation activities. Prioritizing risk is essential to ward off potential disaster and ensure your resources are deployed where needed most.

GAMEPLAN AND EXECUTION DURING AN INCIDENT

While many companies rely on the technology aspects of preventing downtime, (i.e. Recovery Orchestration, cloud backups, automated testing etc.) communication plans, protocols, enablers, and operational models (frameworks) often go underserved.
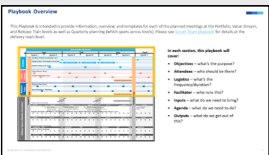
Key elements of a Playbook may include but are not limited to:

SWAT Team Structure for Severity 1 Outages
A list of the senior level team roles and their responsibilities for the outage incidents. Decision making roles should be defined and agreed to in advance of an outage incident.

Cross Team Interaction Model
An interaction model will facilitate efficient working protocols and problem solving between an organization's groups, including external suppliers. In addition, a centralized third party vendor list, SLA, and escalation protocols should be maintained as a part of the playbook.

Incident Communication Plan
A well-defined communication plan will play a critical role in determining your audience, demonstrating remediation urgency, and relieving anxiety. Ensure that the appropriate communication channels are defined across the teams.

Communication Templates
Although outage impacts vary in nature, they will generally fall into broad categories which may include regional outage, local outages, intermittent outage etc. Having communication templates with predefined language will save considerable time and allow team members to focus on outage remediation.

Outage Response Playbook
Developing an Outage Response Playbook will organize the appropriate procedures and communication patterns to be used during an outage. Periodic test execution of the playbook in advance of an outage will build the muscle memory of the service management team and will ultimately help them execute more efficiently.

ROOT CAUSE AND RESILIENCE

The outage does not end when your network or system comes back online. A thorough understanding of the data surrounding the root cause determination is required to uncover any systemic issues.

Ensure governance and up-to-date stakeholder maps are in place with key suppliers to effectively communicate the impact of any outages, performance, adjustments to ways of working, and lessons learned to the right level within the supplier's organization. Communication during an outage to the right senior level supplier contacts can be impactful when resolving an issue in real time, and effective communication after an outage can lead to longer term changes improving relationships and performance.

Root Cause Mapping and Lessoned Learned

Developing a Root Cause Map of an incident will help with the understanding and rationalization of the actions leading to the outage. In highly volatile environments the collection of root cause data over time can be used as an input to determine analytic trends that can be utilized to make more informed policy configuration or equipment decisions. In addition, following a postmortem to identify the root cause of the outage, any lessons learned, and updates should be made to your overall outage response playbook as well as your risk profile.

Jabian is Here to Help

Organizations that have good incident management policies and procedures are proven to be more resilient. Jabian Risk Management professionals can help facilitate identification, assessment, and action plan development for your organization.

Depending on your need, Jabian provides solutions to:

1 Facilitate IT Risk Assessment workshops that identify and prioritize risk

2 Design and deploy incident response playbooks and communication plans

3 Establish best practice Risk Governance policies and processes

If you're interested in learning more about how you can better manage risk, contact us at insights@jabian.com. We can start with a conversation around your needs and tailor an approach that fits your organization.

ABOUT JABIAN

Jabian Consulting is a strategic management and technology consulting firm with an integrated approach to creating and implementing strategies, enhancing business processes, developing human capital, and better aligning technology — ultimately helping clients become more competitive and profitable. Jabian blends functional expertise, industry knowledge, and senior experience to think strategically and act practically. It's a Strategy That Works®.

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