Oh no, systems failure! Simon Clarke reports on two new disaster recovery services.

Several companies have seen the prospects of major computer failure as an opportunity rather than a potential disaster. As the cost of hardware comes down, and computing power rockets, the area which offers most scope for competitive edge appears to be customer support. This year has seen a sudden rise in the awareness that computer failure can be more than just irritating, and may threaten the survival of a business itself; hence the number of computer vendor-led disaster recovery schemes that have been thrust on the market. Amongst those launched recently was a comprehensive package for ICL customers involving both risk management and disaster recovery. The company defines computer disaster as "an event which threatens to make the computing facilities of an organisation unavailable for a period of time which will threaten the survival of that organisation". A dramatic reconstruction of a (hypothetical) disaster as it occurred served to make this rather prosaic description live. A fire in a local council office reduced its computerised poll tax records to slag and to affect the barcoding equipment and electronic tills of the supermarket next door. What the fire left behind was ruined by the earnest efforts of the local fire brigade. Six months later, the council had several million pounds of arrears to cope with, an astronomical clerical bill and some fairly irritated voters. The supermarket had gone bust.

When pressed, ICL admitted that no UK firm had actually gone out of business as a result of such a disaster, but that some had in the US. Lesser problems had occurred, including a systems failure at Black and Decker's UK distribution centre which resulted in the automated picking system to fail. Employees wearing mountaineering equipment had to climb warehouse racking to retrieve products. Stranger than fiction, another example was given of a fire at a US Air Force base which burned out the computer installation, caused by a squirrel gnawing through a power cable. National Security prevents disclosure of the implications, although it's odds on that the squirrel regretted its action.

Although it's possible to see the funny side, the implications of a major computer breakdown in certain critical areas are profound. ICL estimates that a crash at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Centre would cost the taxpayer £25 million and take 100 man-years to recover the lost data. Based on an American survey, the prediction is that the manufacturing sector would only be able to maintain essential functions for 4.9 days in the event of data processing shut down. ICL estimates that computer disasters could be costing British businesses £1.5 billion a year and that one in every thousand organisations will suffer a crisis.

So what actions can you take to prevent this from happening, or to cope if it does? ICL offers a 'prevention and care' solution involving contingency management consultancy to minimise risk of the disaster happening, assess its impact and develop a recovery plan, and the recovery management scheme to pull your fat out of the fire should the worst occur.

The services on offer begin with 'hot restart', which provides a dedicated computer within three hours of the disaster and six weeks support thereafter, plus provision of replacement equipment delivered to a client's temporary computer room for use for a further three months. 'Mobile restart' offers much the same but delivered on-site in a trailer, while 'cold backup' involves provision of a pre-planned environment where replacement equipment can be located. Intimate 'systems bonding' can be had for a price for those organisations who want to bond a system for delivery within two days of the disaster. Periodic installation, commissioning, checking and modification is included in addition to storage in a secure (and hopefully fireproof) computer warehouse.

Although no UK company has yet foundered because of lack of disaster planning, some in the US have, and it can only be a matter of time before our increasing reliance on the microchip lands us in trouble. In a spirit of defiance, Computerised Manufacturing suggests that perhaps the UK's technology gap could work in its favour for once and that, while the industrial world leaders curse in front of darkened VDUs, British manufacturing engineers waving reams of paperwork move into the fast lane of industry. It's a pleasant day dream.

Meanwhile, for the Luddites amongst you, a warning from the California Banking Association. A breakdown of its data centres would paralyse the economy of California within three days; the US economy within five days, and the world economy within a week.

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Price Waterhouse has also extended its services in the field of disaster recovery. It has recently adopted an expert system, Rexys, to support its disaster recovery consultancy services. The expert system uses the data it gathers to analyse the risks and impact of the loss of IT support to each area of the business. Using the analysis, management and consultants work out a strategy of preventative measures and recovery procedures.

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