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IT and facilities: how to work together to avoid downtime

Effective procedures for managing an often tough relationship

22 March 2012 by David Boston - David Boston Consulting

IT and facilities groups increasingly rely on each other to deliver high availability to data center customers. Does your organization successfully manage the most crucial components of this critical relationship? To confidently answer this question, it is helpful to recognize which responsibilities shared by these groups most frequently generate interruptions to continuous availability. Proven methods may then be applied to minimize these risks.



Aisle at a Brocade data center in San Jose, California.

Industry data consistently demonstrate facilities-related interruptions to computer operations occur most commonly in computer rooms and not in the infrastructure rooms. The reason is simple: People are more frequently present in the computer rooms than in the support-equipment rooms. The risk is compounded because multiple departments co-manage computer rooms, because of the variety of skills required to support the various systems inside them. Given these conditions, the potential for confusion and error is high. That's unless the groups work together to clearly define detailed processes and ownership of key tasks.

Cabling and connection processes

As a top priority, the successful IT/facilities team must clarify which department and which specific individuals will be permitted to install and remove power and network cabling and connections within the computer rooms. The departments should agree where the physical demarcation point is between the portion of the configuration one group owns vs. the other.

They need to define which side of a server rack the facilities department may attach power cables to; which department may physically connect a PDU whip to a stand-alone computer device; which group is permitted to remove a network connector, etc. Diagrams and/or photographs should accompany the written definition of the demarcation points for further clarity.

Only two or three individuals in each group should be permitted to own these critical cabling tasks: one as a primary, the others as back-ups. Continuity in these roles is highly desired, as repetition will breed consistency and minimize the potential for error.

The hardware master plan

Assigning one individual from IT and one from facilities to co-own the development and management of a computer hardware Master Plan is the next most significant objective. These individuals should be required to meet on a weekly basis to decide where incoming computer devices will be installed on the floor and within racks.

A plan view of the computer rooms should be created and updated periodically as conditions change. This drawing should show all anticipated cabinets, racks and free-standing equipment in designated areas reserved in advance for specific types of computer hardware. A separate elevation view of several racks should indicate which types of hardware should be installed in which rack positions, from the bottom to the top.

The IT representative should ensure the plan takes into account specific requirements for connectivity, required interaction with other hardware or network devices and distance limitations. The facilities team member should ensure the plan accounts for specific cooling and power requirements, such as placing the highest heat producing servers near the bottom of a rack, if cooling is delivered from a raised floor. Both individuals should have an assigned back-up. No computer hardware should be installed or removed without the approval of both the IT and facilities Master Plan owners.



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Less people - less problems

As a third method to minimize risks, minimize the number of people with access to computer rooms. The risk of error is greatly reduced when the number of individuals with access is absolutely minimal. This requires a strong commitment from senior management.

Only those with a need to work within the computer rooms at least once a week should be provided unescorted access. Most others should be escorted when they enter. A select few may be permitted to check out a temporary badge, if they have demonstrated a complete understanding of computer-room work procedures. The access list should be reviewed quarterly by management to verify continued access requirement for each individual.

Clarity on procedures

Facilities and IT share one additional opportunity to significantly diminish risk in the computer room environment: Every individual who will set foot in the computer rooms should be required to review a thorough set of site-specific computer-room work procedures. This document should define all precautions for work activities in the computer rooms and is typically 10-15 pages long. Each department's manager should review this document with each respective employee and vendor who will be permitted to work in the computer rooms, escorted or not. Signed copies should be filed and updated annually. An abbreviated version of the document should be reviewed with anyone who will tour the computer rooms with an escort, but not work within the rooms.

By targeting the most common causes of interruption, organizations with these processes in place have extended their continuous operation substantially. Continued application will dramatically increase uptime potential over the life of the facility.

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