

Hospital News / Business Continuity Planning for Hospitals

By Douglas Grosfield

Hospitals are moving into the era of EHR (electronic health records), which is great for communications. It means that doctors, nurses, and other professionals can access important patient information, and exchange that information amongst themselves. However, this can also present problems. If a system is down, doctors and other healthcare professionals can't access what they need. And what about an unforeseen catastrophe, such as a fire or natural disaster? We're talking about business continuity. Hospitals must be prepared, but many are not.

A business continuity plan ensures successful backup and recovery strategies, and often having a mirror site. In the IT world, this is called *replication*.

Today, digital imaging is widespread. PAX (Picture Archive Exchange) provides detailed imaging of such things as brain scans, but merely capturing data from an MRI or CAT machine isn't enough. Consideration must be given to a recoverability plan or the data risks being lost. Core considerations must include maintaining data accuracy, recoverability, and the security of data.

Security involves a combination of internal policies as well as adoption of technologies to allow one to control access to data. This means who can access it, where/when they can access it, and ensuring the reliability of data. With hardware, redundancy should be built in to mitigate the risk of a single component failure. A fault tolerant design must include redundant storage, power, network connectivity, even total system duplication at a remote replication site . If you suddenly

lose power or a server goes down, everyone is “out of business” until the power returns or you replace the failed component. This is why the overall system design has to consider the associated risks of having any single points of failure.

Hospitals (like many organizations) traditionally like to protect their own turf, and it goes for information, too. When a patient moves from one location or from one city to another, it’s important for the hospital to retain accuracy of information, as well as recoverability of information and security of information.

The Ontario government has the Smart Systems for Health Agency (SSHA), which is an enabling force behind a province-wide, IT infrastructure that delivers electronic solutions. It helps improve health care delivery by providing secure, reliable systems and solutions to connect doctors, nurses, hospitals, pharmacies, and laboratories to each other, and to patient information. SSHA creates electronic connections for information to speed up the flow of information and to help create networks of care not only among hospitals, but also Public Health Units and organizations that treat the same patients. SSHA is essentially a high-speed backbone that provides connectivity, allowing all these facilities to share information. This could be a good-news story regarding business-continuity planning and data replication.

Companies and facilities exist to allow an organization to pay for protection against disaster, and do so as a service, reducing the capital expenditure involved. Access to the infrastructure necessary, as well as the software and licensing to enable full replication and failover/failback is readily available. CA XoSoft is one such product, and is available in a “Software as a Service” model.

“Many hospitals don’t budget for disaster recovery and business continuity,” says Julie DenBeste, Area Sales Director for Agility Recovery Solutions, which provides recovery services for organizations across North America and has a distribution centre in Mississauga, Ontario. “They may have all these computers and servers, but no backup. What if you have a major fire or a flood in the hospital’s server room?”

DenBeste says that, in hospitals, IT is often not budgeted properly. There is no one designated to drive a particular project, so it doesn’t get done. “We had a healthcare provider where the roof of the building literally caved in and the call centre was destroyed,” she said. “If you don’t plan, you are courting disaster.”

But many hospitals aren’t aware that such companies as Agility Recovery Solutions even exist. This company’s mission is to keep its clients connected to their customers, employees, and users, and ensure continuity of the business.

Here are a few pointers that hospitals should take into consideration when looking at business-continuity planning for IT:

- Be aware of all the IT solutions available. Just because something has a high purchase price doesn’t mean there are not other options available to you. Ask the experts.
- Redundancy can mitigate the risk of a single component failure, a failure that could lead to massive data loss.

- Don't be deterred by the prospect of a major capital investment in IT since you can pay a monthly fee to a provider and use that provider's infrastructure.
- Consider engaging the services of a company that specializes in disaster recovery.

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