

Frank Hayes



What, IT Worry?

LAST TUESDAY, Craigslist vanished from the Internet. So did LiveJournal and Technorati. CNET.com and Second Life were reportedly gone for a while too. What happened? The data center they all shared went dark because of a power failure. Simple enough, right? Except that the main point of using that data center was so they'd never have to worry about power failures.

See, a major marketing feature of 365 Main, the humongous San Francisco collocation facility that failed last week, is that it offers power that just won't quit. When power from the local utility goes out, a bank of 10 3,000-horsepower diesel generators is supposed to kick on automatically and keep running until stable power is restored — for days, if necessary.

In fairness to 365 Main, it always worked that way in the past.

But not last week. Early Tuesday afternoon, external electric power started fluctuating wildly. A nearby underground transformer exploded. Power went out for a large section of downtown San Francisco, including the Financial District — up to 50,000 customers in all.

And for reasons that 365 Main is still investigating, some of its backup generators didn't fire up as they should have. It took about 45 minutes for on-site en-

gineers to start the generators manually.

By then, the damage was done for Craigslist, LiveJournal and the others — between 20% and 40% of 365 Main's customers. Their servers went down hard. And instead of the magically continuous service their businesses had counted on, those servers had to be brought back up the hard way, slowly and carefully.

The lucky ones were offline for only a few hours. But even for them, the magic was gone.

It should be gone for the rest of us, too. It's time to accept some hard reality.

Bad things happen. They happen no matter how carefully we plan for

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them, because we can't plan for everything. They happen no matter who we've paid to take on the job of handling those bad things, no matter how much we've paid, no matter what promises we've been given.

Collocation and outsourcing don't work — at least not if what we expect them to do is solve our business continuity problems.

They won't do that. They can't. We shouldn't expect them to.

In fact, we should assume that they won't, and plan accordingly.

That's true even if a company like 365 Main brags that its power can't go down. It can. Murphy willing, it will. And nothing 365 Main does after the fact can make whole the lost sales, lost customers and lost confidence that come in the wake of that failed boast.

So, is outsourcing always the wrong move? Of course not. *Trusting*

outsourcers — that's the wrong move.

We have to believe they'll do their best. Otherwise, we shouldn't be doing business with them. But we also have to know that they're not perfect, no matter what their brightly colored brochures say.

We can hand off work, but we can't hand off responsibility for our company's IT functions. That's still ours.

Which means we can't outsource sleepless nights. We can't quit developing what-if scenarios and contingency plans. We can't stop looking for ways to backstop our vendors' "bulletproof" services — just in case a bullet somehow gets through.

When it comes to reliability, worry is good. Trust? Not so much.

One of the 365 Main customers, online retailer RedEnvelope, had the right idea. RedEnvelope maintained a backup data center in Cincinnati to avoid the results of just the sort of problem that struck last week.

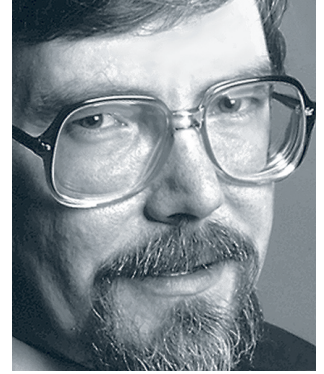
But after two years without a glitch in San Francisco, 365 Main issued a press release announcing that RedEnvelope had shuttered the Ohio facility.

That was Tuesday morning. That afternoon, RedEnvelope was offline. ■

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Game-Changer



WILL THE GooglePhone matter? Last week, Google officially unveiled its long-rumored mobile phone software. Dubbed “Android,” the Linux-based software stack is being backed by more than 30 partners, including handset makers Motorola, Samsung, LG and HTC, and service providers Sprint Nextel, T-Mobile and NTT DoCoMo.

But no Nokia. No AT&T or Verizon. No Apple or Palm.

No Symbian, Microsoft or RIM. Without them, will Android matter at all?

Hold that thought.

The day after Google’s Android announcement, the One Laptop Per Child Foundation said that its low-cost, Linux-based laptops for kids are finally rolling off the assembly line in China. The little green XO laptops, with their built-in mesh networking and low-power-consumption design, will start shipping to Uruguay and Mongolia shortly.

Two years ago, when MIT’s Nicholas Negroponte first started showing prototypes of the XO, nobody in the IT business took it seriously. It was too small for adults to use comfortably, too toy-like in appearance, too underpowered to run commercial software. And it was being developed by academics who had never designed a real product, much less sold a single unit. There’s just no mar-

ket for it, the bigwigs said.

Intel boss Craig Barrett went out of his way to sneer at the XO, calling it “the \$100 gadget.” Of course, Intel rival AMD was supplying the CPUs for the XO. And Intel had its own low-end laptop, the Classmate PC, which it was trying to sell to foreign governments to distribute to students — with not much success.

Two years later, the XO’s price has ballooned to almost \$200. And Negroponte, who circled the globe talking up the XO and getting handshake agreements from governments, has discovered that doesn’t often translate into an actual purchase.

■ **Can Google’s Android make a difference? Sure. Android doesn’t even have to win. It just has to be in the game.**

But those two years have raised the concept of low-end laptops from an academic fantasy to a marketplace reality.

Today, Intel is selling Classmate PCs by the thousands at about \$300 each (its biggest deal is 700,000 in Pakistan), has joined Negroponte’s foundation and may use some of the XO’s technology in its own products.

Meanwhile, Asustek is now selling an XO-like laptop called the Eee PC in Taiwan for about \$250 to consumers. And in the U.S., Wal-Mart has been selling Acer laptops for under \$350.

And starting today, U.S. and Canadian consumers can even get an XO — as long as they’re willing to pay \$399, so a second XO can be shipped to a third-world student.

But before XO has even shipped, it’s already a game-changer. That nonexistent market for a low-end laptop for kids? Now it exists.

Funny how competition will do that.

Which brings us back to Google’s Android. Let’s face it: Google has about as much experience making mobile phones as Negroponte had making laptops in 2005. Sure, Google has money to burn, and it has lined up partnerships with major players in the mobile business — but not the top U.S. players.

Can Android still make a difference? Sure. Android doesn’t even have to win. It just has to be in the game.

What does Android promise? Lots of third-party applications and better Web browsing, mainly. That’s what Nokia, Apple, Symbian, AT&T and the rest will be scrambling to match in the year before Android-based phones hit the market.

So those new capabilities will be out there anyway. And since Google makes its money from ads on Web pages, the 800-pound gorilla of dot-coms wins even if Android loses.

The rest of us? We get Android’s benefits either way, too — easier development, more usable Web apps, the things that can make smart phones better business tools.

All because Google isn’t afraid to compete.

And there’s nothing the matter with that at all. ■

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