

FOCUS ON IT



AN ALICOMP INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY NEWSLETTER

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

IT Problems: Friends Or Foes?	1
Open Systems Outsourcing	1
Disaster Recovery: A Case Study	3
Meet A Member of the Alicomp Team	3

IT PROBLEMS: Friends or Foes?

What's your first reaction when you are told that there is a "slow response time" problem... or that there was an "operator error" last night? Frustration? That response is understandable because problems mean delays and delays cost money.

However, if your only response is frustration, you are missing a valuable perspective. A problem can also be an opportunity. An important step to having that view is by documenting

problems through a Problem Management System that utilizes a Help Desk structure. It can be one of management's most valuable tools.

To assure that all problems are reported, it is necessary that everyone understand the definition of "Problem."

What is a problem?

Any and all activity which interferes with a user's ability to work. This definition needs to be communicated to all participants and staff.

- Space problem
- Vendor error
- Hardware problem

A mission statement should also be submitted to all participants. One example:

To maximize end-user productivity through the appropriate and effective use of information systems Mainframe, PC, WAN/LAN by managing user questions, problems and requests (for software, hardware, etc.) quickly, accurately, and consistently.

Documenting A Problem:

Two important steps should take place in response to learning about a problem: (1) determine its cause, and (2) fix it. But one other step is also critical: documenting the problem within a Problem Management (Help Desk) structure.

Noted below are some actual examples:

- System is down
- Output not available
- User error
- User awaiting tape
- Slow response time
- Line is down
- Program abends
- I/O error



The process of documenting every problem includes the following:

- Ticket # & Severity
- Client
- Date and time problem is recorded
- Who reported problem
- Description of problem
- Chronology of incident
- Cause of problem
- Who resolved the problem
- Date and time of problem resolution

The documentation of problems results in a report of what occurred and when. At our company, we create daily, weekly and monthly

(Continued on page 2)



OPEN SYSTEMS OUTSOURCING



Mainframe outsourcing has, over the past several decades, been an often-used business strategy which allows companies to save substantial amounts of money while generally improving service to their end users. In the past ten years, as more and more companies have either gotten off the mainframe or began using the mainframe in tandem with

open systems, open systems outsourcing is now becoming another very popular business strategy.

Open systems outsourcing is the outsourcing of technologies such as servers, AS400s and other mid-range computers of all kinds. The reason companies began to look at open systems outsourcing is that, like mainframe outsourcing, it came after companies found that it is very difficult to maintain staff infrastructure and security while trying to focus on their core businesses.

As more companies began to offer open systems outsourcing prices began to drop, availability became

more universal, and companies became more and more interested in it.

One of the similarities between mainframe outsourcing and open systems outsourcing is that the company doing the outsourcing generally takes over the hardware systems software network and infrastructure. In some

(Continued on page 2)

IT PROBLEMS: Friends or Foes?

...Continued from Page 1

reports that are distributed internally as well as to the relevant clients.

So often, the workload can be so heavy, as managers are busy putting out fires, that it is difficult to keep an accurate pulse on all aspects of the operation. One of your best "friends" can be the Help Desk Report. How often has there been "slow response time" this

"It isn't unusual that 80% of the operation is running smoothly. It's the 20% that requires attention and the Problem Management System helps management locate and address that 20% which is also ever changing."

month? Has the cause been the same or have there been various ones? How was it resolved? How many operator errors occurred? Is it the same operator? How do the current week's problems compare with those of last week? Last month? Last year?

There are two scenarios that I have experienced which merit attention. One is where a client calls me because of frustration that a problem has occurred "many times." My first question is: Was it reported to the Help Desk? The response often is that it was NOT reported. How often has it occurred? What is the root cause? Have steps been taken to eliminate the problem? Without reporting a problem, management (whether it is a supervisor, manager or executive,) does not have an accurate or complete picture of what is occurring.

Another scenario occurs when a client calls and says that a problem has been happening "over and over again." I will then review the Help Desk Report. That problem may have occurred twice. For most problems, once is too many, but the client may not have an accurate or comprehensive perspective. When a client calls about a problem and the perspective is not correct, it is followed up immediately by communicating with the

client about each specific occurrence. There can be a shift in perception if a specific type of problem has occurred twice in nine **days** rather than twice in nine **months**. This process helps the client to have a more accurate perspective of the problem.

Persistence in Reporting Problems:

Assuring that the reporting of problems is a standard business practice is a major responsibility for all management levels.

Whether it is staff or a client, at times, the process of reporting a problem is forgotten or ignored; it is a process that can be perceived as a burden. Therefore, management must be persistent about assuring that problems are reported.

Benefits of Reporting Problems:

The benefits to management of reporting and documenting problems are many:

1. Enhanced communication with and among staff.
2. Enhanced communication with client/end user.
3. Efficiency through a single point of contact.
4. Discovering trends that identify root problems.
5. Discovering trends that require action.
6. Pinpointing who needs more training (client and/or staff).
7. Justification for taking certain actions.

It is the major tool for helping many to have a clear accurate picture of what is occurring and where changes need to be made.

Problems As Opportunities:

Keeping the focus of a problem as an opportunity is a critically important task because it is true. With a problem reporting system in place, management then has reports that help him/her to accurately see what is occurring and to make decisions or changes to improve the operation.

It isn't unusual that 80% of the operation is running smoothly. It is the 20% that requires attention and the Problem Management System helps management locate and address that 20% which is also ever changing.

No operation remains static: it is either im-

proving or deteriorating and management needs every tool it has at its disposal to determine where problems are occurring and exactly what those problems are. That 20% that requires attention will change and management needs to know where it is and address it: the Help Desk, plus its reports, is one of management's primary allies. ■

OPEN SYSTEMS OUTSOURCING

...Continued from Page 1

cases, the outsourcing company also takes over responsibility for applications while in other scenarios applications are left with the company. Many other services can be part of an open systems program including disaster recovery, off-site storage, network monitoring, performance monitoring, disc utilization and Level One Help Desk Responsibilities.

Alicomp's first experience with open systems outsourcing involves a well-known auto parts manufacturer. At first, we were responsible for taking over their Data Center in the mid-atlantic region, installing our own employees along with some of the client's employees to run the work "in place." Over time, the work was moved to our Georgia Data Center where most of our expertise in AS400s is located. The migration occurred over a long holiday since this company could not afford any downtime other than the end of the year when all of their employees take a vacation break. This outsourcing program has been extremely successful for both Alicomp and the client and many other clients have followed.

At Alicomp we provide outsourcing from web servers to mainframes. This gives companies the ability to selectively outsource any or all of their technologies to us. With our three Data Centers in Leonia, NJ, Norcross, GA and Orange County, CA, we are able to provide these services geographically if the client desires. ■

DISASTER RECOVERY: A Case Study

Alicomp recently conducted a Disaster Recovery (DR) test for a major client. The test objectives were to recover their OS/390 operating system, all application data and establish communication to their site. This would fully simulate the loss of the data center while still having their location unaltered. Actual testing involved both batch and online application.

Prior to the test date, complete reviews of backup procedures were conducted along with an audit of the off-site storage of this data. A few days before the test a recall list was generated and all tapes were retrieved. Also, prior to the test, a "pre-test" of communication was conducted to verify communication between the client's site and the DR site. These were done to reduce valuable time at the DR site.

On the night of the test, Alicomp Tech Services arrived at the DR site at 23:30 for a 00:00 test. After the usual paperwork and formalities, we were escorted

to our DR suite. The suite comprised of a Command Center, with numerous terminals and network switches, and a meeting room with a large conference table, chairs and a refrigerator. The tapes were located on a different floor and we were provided with a "hot line" to the tape library.

We immediately started to establish our tape library and system environment. The DR center provided us with a "floor" VM/ESA system, and we immediately started to run stand-alone restores. We ran into a bottleneck when we found that we were limited to 4 tape drives. This was due to an answer on a questionnaire submitted to the DR vendor prior to the test. It did limit our ability to run concurrent restores and did increase the time needed.

While they were running, the Tech Services staff broke into two groups: the Operating Systems (OS) group and the Communication (Comm) group.

The OS group established the proper VM definitions to run the OS/390 system as a 2nd level guest. This allowed us to match the DR Center's hardware addresses to the ones generated in the OS/390 system and eliminate the need for an "I/O Gen".

The Comm group worked on establishing communication with the client's location. They ran into a problem that required some of the hardware to be reconfigured. After some time, the problems were resolved and TCP/IP communication was established.

At 06:00 the OS/390 system was restored and IPL'd. Local staff was immediately able to log on to TSO, continue restoring application data and complete the needed changes for communications. A problem was found when an attempt was made to share the OSA between TCP/IP and SNA traffic. Our communication staff worked on it and had to modify the

(Continued on page 4)

MEET SHANTIE DIPNARINE...A Member of the Alicomp Team

Guyana is known for several natural resources. Gold, bauxite and diamonds are exported throughout the globe. The other natural resource that migrated to the United States is Shantie Dipnarine.

Shantie is the Executive Director of Computer Operations/Support Services, and has approximately 25 years of experience in Data Processing/Computer Operations. Shantie's responsibilities include maintaining and controlling the day-to-day operation of the



data center and maintaining a high level of performance from her staff. This staff works 365 days per year, 24 hours per day, and strives to maintain a professional level of service to ALLCOMP clients. Shantie has worked with the following platforms OS/390, VM, and VSE. She has extensive knowledge of the following job schedulers: CA7, PCS, JOBTRAC, and BETA42.

Prior to joining ALICOMP in 1987, Shantie was employed by a major brokerage house where she was responsible for the production schedule functions and test systems for the firm. In addition, she was supervisor in the production department at a service bureau in Manhattan for several years and also worked for a major TV network. Shantie attended Business and Computer classes at

Columbia University as well as training courses at Radio Corporation of America (RCA) Training School for Business. On a personal note, Shantie is a knowledgeable world traveler and an ardent fan of the theater. She is also very dedicated to her work responsibilities and is always willing to go above and beyond the call of duty. We are very fortunate to have her as part of the Alicomp team.

Q: What do you like best about your job?

Shantie: "I love the constant challenge in resolving issues and assisting clients with whatever their needs are. It is gratifying to meet those challenges because in today's world of technology there is constant change in technical and upgrade requirements."

"The staff is one of the most wonderful to be with."

(Continued on page 4)

DISASTER RECOVERY:**A Case Study**

...Continued from Page 3

configuration for the OSA to resolve this issue.

Finally at 09:00 the client's remote SNA Gateway was activated and full functionality was available. Client testing would now begin.

Testing was conducted using their "Test" systems, but a secondary objective would be to restore their 160GB Production database. This is now backed up using 3590 high-density tapes. A problem was immediately found with the 3590 hardware at Alicomp's data center and the tape drives at the DR site. The Alicomp tape drives are part of an IBM VTS Magstar robot while the DR site's drives are stand-alone. To implement, it would require an I/O gen and IPL. After a discussion with the client, it was decided to skip this step and resolve it back at Alicomp's Data Center.

At 12:00 noon all client testing was completed successfully and the test concluded. Alicomp's Tech Services staff proceeded to "Zero Out" all the DASD drives so that no data would be left behind. The tape library was packed up and shipped back to the offsite storage location.

In conclusion the following Primary objectives were met:

- 1) Restore OS/390 system
- 2) Restore Test data and run both batch and online systems against this data.
- 3) Establish communications to the client's home site and conduct the testing from that location

Secondary objectives:

- 1) Restore all Production data and verify
- 2) Restore Production Data Base was not met due to differences in the 3590 tape hardware. This could have been resolved, but the client deemed it not critical to the test and was satisfied that it would be resolved at Alicomp's Data Center.

One issue encountered was the availability of only 4 tape drives. This will be resolved by requesting additional drives for the next test. We were assured that if it were an actual disaster recovery, more could be added. It was a time issue. Secondly, we encountered a problem with two tape drives where the tape cartridges were physically stuck in the drive. This required an IBM Technician, who is stationed on site, to remove them. The final problem was the lack of cell phone service. We did have a number of land lines at our disposal and used them.

This test was deemed a success by the client and Alicomp. ■

MEET SHANTIE DIPNARINE

...Continued from Page 3

Shantie: "The job has become part of my family. I treat my job like a member of my family. I'm here for them, staff and clients alike. I spend more time here than I do at home, so, of course, this is my second family."

Q: What is the most challenging aspect of your job?

Shantie: "Time restrictions and timeframes! Should there be a problem, that problem has to be resolved in time to get the on-line regions up again without any extended delay. Users use their flex-time option so the on-lines have to be available for those who come in early."

Q: How have you grown in your job?

Shantie: "I am developing and improving various skills. I am becoming a better communicator with clients. My position and responsibilities have enabled me to be more involved with our clients. As a result, I more clearly understand their culture and goals. That helps me to serve them better. As the clients expand and grow; I hope I am growing along with them."

Q: Any other thoughts or comments you would like to add?

Shantie: "The staff is one of the most wonderful to be with. They are part of my family; it is always a pleasure to be here and work with them because I am not in a 9-5 position, it's a 24 x 7 position, and I'm at home here."

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IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

Selecting the Optimum IT Vendor

Interview: An Alicomp Client

Meet A Member Of The Alicomp Team

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