

Google E-Mail Outage Stresses SaaS/Cloud Services' Vulnerability

Donna Scott, Matthew W. Cain

Recent unreliable commercial e-mail service from Google has underscored the need for enterprises to develop contingency plans for software-as-a-service applications.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 6 August, 11 August and 15 August 2008, Google's enterprise e-mail system, Apps Premier Edition, shut down and disrupted some organizations and users that rely on the service. One of the outages was systemwide, affecting nearly all users for approximately two hours; the other two outages affected part of the user base for less than 24 hours.

On 28 August 2008, Google said it would credit all its customers with 15 days of service (even if they were not impacted), which is more than the contracted penalty for not meeting its 99.9% service-level agreement (SLA) commitment. Google also promised it would improve its communications regarding future outages by implementing a dashboard and by offering post-mortem calls.

Analysis

Business executives who source applications through software as a service (SaaS) or cloud models often assume that the provider will deliver the service with minimal to no unplanned service interruptions. The prevailing perception is "turn it on and it is always there" — but the reality regarding service availability is not so simple. Within the cloud, the traditional complexities of managing data centers, infrastructure and applications still persist, but the service provider is responsible for uptime. The critical difference between premise deployments and SaaS/cloud architectures is that the latter are typically far more complex and must support thousands of customers simultaneously.

While organizations can set expectations with their service provider via an SLA, there are no guarantees those SLAs will be met. In addition, it is likely that no contract penalty will be able to compensate for the lost business or damaged company image associated with an unplanned mission-critical service outage. When Google misses SLAs, it offers what is typical in the industry: a certain number of days of "free" service (often 30 days; Google offers 15 days). Uptime is only one characteristic of service quality; Gartner believes that service delivery SLAs are insufficient if they are overly dependent on a single metric. To be effective, SLAs should also take into consideration other factors, such as performance, privacy, data rights, business continuity/disaster recovery and recovery time.

In light of the e-mail service failures, Google has promised to build a client-accessible dashboard, which it states will be available in a "few months," and will provide data on the nature of the problem and the estimated time-to-resolution. We believe this overdue action — along with the need for a better change management communication process — reveals Google's immaturity in selling commercial applications as well as the overall immaturity of the SaaS market.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Before signing up for service, enterprises should:

- Review the vendor's uptime past history.
- Prepare for the contingency of subpar performance by implementing plans to migrate to an alternative service, and understand the costs, resources, time and other implications of doing so.

- Contractually reserve the right to cancel services without penalty, should SLAs be consistently missed.

RECOMMENDED READING

- "IT Operational Considerations for Cloud Computing" — Gartner advises IT operations groups on how to evaluate the currently proliferating cloud services with respect to operational risks. **By Donna Scott**
- "The State of Google Apps" — Gartner explores the business model behind Google Apps and the usage model with which it is entering enterprise operating environments. **By Tom Austin and others**

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REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS

Corporate Headquarters

56 Top Gallant Road
Stamford, CT 06902-7700
U.S.A.
+1 203 964 0096

European Headquarters

Tamesis
The Glanty
Egham
Surrey, TW20 9AW
UNITED KINGDOM
+44 1784 431611

Asia/Pacific Headquarters

Gartner Australasia Pty. Ltd.
Level 9, 141 Walker Street
North Sydney
New South Wales 2060
AUSTRALIA
+61 2 9459 4600

Japan Headquarters

Gartner Japan Ltd.
Aobadai Hills, 6F
7-7, Aobadai, 4-chome
Meguro-ku, Tokyo 153-0042
JAPAN
+81 3 3481 3670

Latin America Headquarters

Gartner do Brazil
Av. das Nações Unidas, 12551
9º andar—World Trade Center
04578-903—São Paulo SP
BRAZIL
+55 11 3443 1509