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The knee bone's connected to the thighbone, the thighbone's connected to the hipbone, ... well, you know the old song. But in this case, I'm thinking about the data backbone, which is also connected with each one of our lives. For years, I've debated with practitioners about the best method for maintaining critical business programs and data. Of late, more and more of that critical "stuff" has been moving to the "cloud" (a fancy name for the Internet). So your firm has its programs and data in a third-party provider's data center, and that third-party touts the security and reliability of the data center. That's fair enough, but does the provider control the networks you have to cross in order to get to their data center? Unfortunately, the answer is no.

So how are you feeling about your software + services from the "cloud" now? If the network goes down, it won't matter how secure that data center is; you'll still be out of business until the network comes back up. Now, that doesn't mean you couldn't have some event that would bring down the equipment on your premises. You very likely could, but I've always had a better feeling about equipment that passes the see, touch and feel test. So we can debate about the pros and cons of outsourcing all of our critical technology software and data versus housing it internally with all the associated maintenance headaches, but let's save that for another day (or column).

The Public Network

For now, I'd like you to realize just how very fragile the public network is. Case in point: the case of the missing Skype. For those who may not be familiar with Skype, it's a major player in providing voice (telephone) calls over the Internet (VoIP). Many a person (220 million at last count) uses the service to make telephone calls at little or no cost. Skype is an Internet provider,

and in August of 2007, the company had an outage. Now, this wasn't some

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VoIP itself, global warming, hangnails, subprime lending rates, France, ... and well, you get the idea. The reality is that Skype probably grew too fast and didn't have enough redundancy built into its provider plan, and things just caught up with them. If you had chosen Skype to provide voice communications to your business, you would not have been able to make or receive calls for several days, and that's totally unacceptable to most firms.

The Disaster Factor

There are so many possibilities that could affect a provider's ability to let you use their data center, and some of very recent history. I'm thinking of 9-11 (terrorists) and Katrina or the Taiwan earthquake (natural disasters). The earthquake off Taiwan earlier this year shattered Internet connections

for millions in Asia and demonstrates how vulnerable the public network is to interruptions. Only a comprehensive backup system in the infrastructure could prevent total paralysis. The vast linkage on the Internet rests on an infrastructure that spans the world: routers, datacenters, servers, and billions of small re-routers that can direct traffic into various networks via terrestrial and submarine cables or by satellite. Among the weakest points of the Internet are the so-called backbones — the main arteries that form a “vertebral column” for the network that interconnects all the sub-networks and continents.

The Real Solution

During the Asia earthquake, a large share of the traffic that could not travel over the damaged submarine cables was re-routed as an emergency measure to servers

in the United States. But the only real solution would be to develop major electronic backup systems — in other words, reinforced infrastructure such as submarine cables or routers plus other links including satellites. Today, 50 percent of

world traffic travels via one U.S. state — Virginia — where most

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Each of these events has actually happened at one time or another so we're not talking about something that might happen. Every firm's disaster plan should consider what your firm's response would be if any of these events affected you. To summarize, what would your firm do if the public network was unavailable for a period of days ... or worse, weeks? If your firm outsources its software to a service like Thomson's Net Firm, what will your backup plan be if that service is unavailable? Assuming you were faced with having no access to the public network and, thus, no e-mail or phone service, if you did have either primary or backup equipment on site at your business, you'd still be able to get a tax return out the door. Just like Skype, accountants need to think about redundancy.

Technology

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