

This ain't Contoso.com!

Welcome to a little slice of my world. I'll be writing about life right here at home, in the upper Midwest USA, about as far away as it gets from any of power centers on the east and west coasts of the United States. I'll share stories about a typical small consultant working hard to survive and maybe even prosper some day.

It wasn't always this way...

What seems like eons ago, I worked for the then second largest computer company in the world, Digital Equipment Corporation. At its peak, DEC had roughly 120,000 employees and a global presence almost nobody could match. I left in 1994 and started a company called Scott Consulting. By early 1999, I had an emerging company with 14 people and a little more than \$1 million in revenue. Unfortunately, my emerging company stopped emerging and started going the other way and by late 1999, I found myself with an opportunity to pursue other interests. I started a company called InfraSupport with one full time employee – me – and so far, I've been able to hold my own in a cutthroat market with too many providers and not enough customers.

I've accumulated many colorful stories over the years. One of them happened just last Saturday. I was half asleep when my cell phone rang. It was a customer and his system was completely dead.

This case was noteworthy because this particular customer had months of advance warning and chose to ignore all of it. It represents why I struggle and illustrates the dumb decisions people make because IT has such a poor reputation.

A new owner bought this company about a year ago. I visited shortly after the new ownership and put in some network improvements. I saw several issues that needed to be fixed and tried to convince the owner to take care of them. The reply – a resounding no. The owner said he could not afford to pour more money into this business and hinted about IT being a constant drain.

I visited again 3 months ago and noticed one of the hard drives in their Dell server had an amber fault light. The server had two physical drives, lashed together into a RAID 1 set. One of the mirrors had gone bad. I showed this to everyone I could find, explained the significance to the best of my ability, and everyone blew me off. The conversation went something like this:

Greg: You guys aren't mirroring any more. You only have one copy of all your data right now, and if this drive goes bad, you'll be in a world of hurt.

Customer: Thank you for your input, but we do regular backups so we'll be OK.

Greg: Have you ever tested those backups?

Customer: No, our software vendor handles all of that.

By now, I'm pretty much used to being blown off. I don't know why nobody cares about their infrastructure or reliability; it's just the way it is. Or maybe it's me. Maybe I don't explain it right. I really don't know.

And that leads to last Saturday when the server would not boot. It seems the customer called the trusted software vendor for support and the software vendor said it couldn't help because it couldn't access the server remotely. Duh! So they called me.

Sure enough, they never fixed the failed drive and now the 2nd drive had also failed. So both members of the mirror set were now dead. I called Dell and learned the support agreement lapsed 3 months ago. Dell was still very helpful and we forced one drive back online – even though the controller had declared it offline. What I didn't know until too late was, the customer had swapped drives around in different slots and didn't know which drive was the recently failed drive and which had failed months ago. I forced the wrong one online and rebuilt the mirror set, blasting all data since February.

The customer claims to have a tape backup from a few days ago and we will attempt to restore this next week. Hopefully, the drives will last a few days so we can replace them with good ones. I'm not sure what I'll do if the customer decides not to fix the hardware this time.

This sure is a long way from the sanitary scenarios in the Microsoft certification tests, isn't it?