

CAT and mouse games

Students pay the price for bad management

The disruption in the common admission test for the IIMs, which is being administered online for the first time, does no credit to either the managements of India's premier business schools or the IT firm which has been entrusted with the task of conducting the tests. When the disruption occurred on the first day of the tests staggered over ten days, a spokesman for Prometric, the IT firm responsible, described it as "isolated technical issues". However centres across the country were affected and the media reported confusion and frustration among students who could not offer the test. As one expert has argued, if 14 per cent of the centres and 10 per cent of the students have been affected, the disruption can hardly be called isolated. Problems over booting, logging in (password not accepted), system crashing midway and images not appearing, which the students faced, are all familiar to computer users. It would appear from this that the system set-up was simply not ready or adequate enough to handle the task at hand.

Experts have identified three aspects — technology, infrastructure and process. The technology used was obviously not meant to handle such large numbers as appear for tests in India. The fact that the same firm handles the online GRE tests used by American universities indicates that it was a problem of scale. If the technology is inappropriate then the infrastructure deployed is bound to be so. What is worse, the students who faced problems found the staff on duty inadequately trained to handle the problems that had come up. All this would have been unlikely if the system had been adequately stress-tested for both scale and robustness and

if enough systemic redundancy built in to take care of the load and more. While handling work of such nature "we do load testing and can simulate the number of users taking the test," asserts S Gopalakrishnan, managing director of Infosys, when commenting on the matter.

While a vendor can be changed if need be, it is not possible to order a new coordination committee of the IIMs which is ultimately in charge of the examinations. It could have done better than to blame the whole thing on the vendor as it is ultimately the institutes' responsibility to ensure that the appointed vendor delivers. For this, they have to ask for and satisfy themselves that the system configured has passed the stress tests which replicate the actual conditions, such as the number of users likely to turn up. Perhaps, most unfortunately, there has been no apology from the people responsible till the time of writing for what has happened. The episode unfortunately stresses the impression that the premier management schools of the country which get the best intake are themselves not so savvy at managing things.

While it is reasonable to expect that the glitches will be rectified, it is important not to learn the wrong lessons from this experience. Online testing, involving large numbers of candidates, is viable and workable and a great cost-effective solution to an operation that, when done manually, involves huge logistical challenges which both add to cost and the time taken. The IIMs and the technical fraternity in the country need to reassure everybody that if there is a ghost in the machine, then it has to be exorcised and it is not the machine — that is technology — which is at fault.

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8,000 CAT STUDENTS AFFECTED IN 3 DAYS, ADMIT IIMs

Experts say problem easily avoidable, HRD ministry orders inquiry

BS REPORTERS

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30 November

The Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) today admitted that their maiden attempt to make their Common Admission Test (CAT) a computer-based one had come a cropper, acknowledging that 7,000-8,000 students were unable to take the tests over the past three days.

They attributed the "technical snags" to the 'Conficker' worm and "some hardware issues", and assured that necessary steps are being taken to repair the damage. Conficker, also known as Downup, Downadup and Kido, is a computer worm targeting the Microsoft Windows operating system. It was first detected in November 2008.

At a press conference in Ahmedabad, Samir Barua, Director of IIM-Ahmedabad, admitted: "Yes, we have failed in the first three days but we will correct it." He said all the affected students would be re-scheduled in the coming days.

When asked about mock tests having been conducted for the computer-based test, Barua said, "Mock tests had been conducted. Pankaj Chandra (director of IIM Bangalore) and I had visited the centres and the mock tests were alright."

Barua assured the authorities would accommodate the left-out students in the remaining capacity of the labs but if they (the centres) fell short of capacity, the tests might be rescheduled "by a couple of days". There are a total of 104 centres and 361 labs with a capacity of 17,000 students at any given time.

CAT was scheduled between November 28 and December 7 in 32 cities. Nearly 241,000 applicants have registered and over 24,000 students were to sit for the exams every day, in two slots of 12,000 each. Around 180-200 students can be accommodated at each of the 105 centers (which was cut down to 55 on Day 2). CAT is mandatory for students who wish to study at the seven IIMs and over 150 other B-schools in India.

Charles Kernen, CEO of Prometric (US) — which signed a multi-million dollar contract with the IIMs for the computerised CAT — said the company took several security measures but couldn't prevent the virus attack. "We were unable to remove the virus, so we went back to each individual lab to fix it and increased the degree of virus protection of each lab. We also changed the access control for lesser vulnerability," he added. In the past six months, about 3,000 people had been trained by NIIT, which provides physical infrastructure and personnel for the test.

The Union human resource development (HRD) ministry has written a letter to CAT convener Satish Deodhar



asking him to give a report. "We have already ordered an inquiry into the matter but we can't give an opinion now. We are very concerned about this because a large number of students have been put to inconvenience because of this. Adequate care should have been taken in this regard and we hope this is not repeated again," Union HRD minister Kapil Sibal told *Business Standard*.

Meanwhile, even as some internet experts and management test-preparing institutes rubbished the virus claims and attributed the glitches to "lack of preparedness on the part of Prometric and the IIMs", trouble continued for the third day of CAT. Lack of communication from both the developer of the computer system for CAT, Prometric (India) and the IIMs only added to the woes of the students.

"When we reached the test centre at IMS Ghaziabad at around 8 am, we found the gates closed and we were told that the test stood cancelled. None of the authorities bothered to send an SMS. Also, in spite of a huge crowd waiting outside the premises, none of the Prometric or IIM authorities, who were present there, came out to speak to us," said Abhishek Gupta, who was supposed to take the CAT on the third day.

Exams continued to start late in many centres, with some of them being as late 45 minutes to an hour.

Outstation candidates were miffed the most over lack of communication. "There were students and their parents coming down from far off places like

MANAGEMENT FIASCO

- IIMs, Prometric blame virus
- Experts say this is unbelievable
- HRD ministry raps IIMs, demands report
- Problems continue on third day
- Students complain of no communication
- Legal challenges by unsuccessful students likely

Bareilly who were stranded," added Gupta.

There were reports of students not being intimated about rescheduling of their tests on Monday, and thus missing it. Meanwhile, those whose tests were cancelled on Day 1 and 2 are yet to hear from Prometric, despite assurances that they would get an SMS or call by Sunday evening. Nearly 50 labs in 22 centres been shut down on Sunday for repair after students complained of problems on day one.

Vivek Jain, a 28-year-old marketing professional from Bangalore, regrets having attempted the CAT this year. "Although my test started smoothly, people around me faced several technical issues and this in turn disturbed my concentration. While these people will get a re-schedule, we won't get another chance. I have lost a year's time preparing for this exam".

Experts are not ready to buy the virus theory, cited by Prometric and IIM authorities. If one is using existing, outsourced infrastructure (computers) to conduct one of India's most prestigious exams, formatting the systems (deleting everything from the computer) and loading ONLY the operating system and the CAT software on this secure system would have prevented the so called "virus attack".

"The news of virus being the reason for the crash is unbelievable. We have conducted similar tests with around 25,000 of our students taking the test on the internet simultaneously without any glitches. The computer-based CAT should be much easier than that," said Sujit Bhattacharya, director, technology, at Career Launcher.

Other experts debunked the virus claim, too. "Viruses are a problem only when we connect to the internet. In this case, when you are connecting to only one server, there is no chance at all of the virus getting into your system. While we are conducting a test, we make sure that the user cannot access anything on the local machine. It is sterilised clean and the chances of a virus attack are zero. This is basically to prevent copying. Prometric, by admitting that a virus attack has taken place, has put the future of the exam at risk. What stops one student for going to court and saying that the virus changed the answers before it sent the data to the server?" asked DSK legal consultant and cyber expert Vijay Mukhi.

CAT blame game: IIMs and NIIT new targets

KALPANA PATHAK &
ARCHANA M PRASANNA
Mumbai / Bangalore, 30
November

Even as day three of the computer-based Common Admission Test (CAT) continued to add to the anxiety of the student community, academicians have shifted the blame game from Prometric to the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and NIIT, accusing them of adopting a highly casual attitude.

Prometric bagged the contract from IIMs to conduct computer-based CAT this year in partnership with NIIT.

"The IIMs could have done more than just outsourcing the exams to Prometric. By blaming Prometric, IIMs can't acquit themselves. If one-sixth of the 304 test labs fail, it's an absolute joke of an examination. A little control on part of the IIMs could have helped," said a professor from a B-school which accepts CAT scores for admissions.

Experts say CAT which generates up to Rs 50 crore annually for the IIMs could have been better, had IIMs kept a check on the entire process post outsourcing it. Also, the CAT committee went overboard attaching frills like biometric identity systems, online video and audio screening, etc., which burdened the systems.

MBA test preparing institutes feel that academically too, IIMs have failed. These institutes are of the opinion that while the question paper this time was easier as compared to CAT 2008, many questions were taken from past question papers which are in the knowledge of general public. Students who would have practiced it, stand to gain while students who did not, stand to lose.

"Prometric should have carried out a month of vigorous checking at all the test centres. If MBA-test preparing institutes can successfully administer such an examination for their students, we fail to understand why a professional company like Prometric failed," said a source from Career Launcher.

Experts said that the agencies should have taken some steps like conducting a "dress rehearsal" before the day of the actual CAT would have shown up the flaws in the sys-