

What went wrong with CAT?

Experts place bet on incompatible systems and poor preparedness

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BANGALORE: When word got around that the much-anticipated maiden digital Common Admission Test 2009 (CAT) had leapt to a false start on Saturday, web forums went viral with furious candidates venting ire at the fiasco. But what really went wrong with an exam that cost the Union Human Resource Department no less than \$ 40 million?

The most common, yet most erroneous version doing the rounds, was that there was a "server crash".

Given that the CAT was computer-based (not online) — using a distributed testing system, in technical parlance — chances of servers crashing are negligible. However, experts would place their bet on incompatible systems at test centres and poor preparedness. Given that on Sunday the exam was cancelled in 24 of the 105 centres across 32 cities, the failure has exceeded the acceptable margin of error, experts say.

Several experts participating in discussions, both online and on television networks, were quick to blame the decision to "outsource" this critical task to U.S.-based company Prometric; others pointed fingers at computer education firm NIIT which was providing on-ground service delivery. With Prometric offering no information on what exactly went wrong, speculations are rife on which part of the delivery chain failed students. In a communiqué on Sunday, Prometric attributed the cancellations to virus or malware attack. Ruling out server issues, the note stated that the anti-virus on the terminals could not detect the onslaught.

So what were the symptoms? From what students had to say, both the login to the Operating System and the test package were slow. Ridden with bugs, several students claimed, the system booted them out. However, the test part, they added, was smooth once the internal tim-

er got started. Even basic registration and biometric identification were problematic, they said.

One probable issue could lie with the fact that college laboratories need to be sanitised, as most have multiple Operating Systems, may not have firewalls and could be virus-infected. "We were surprised to see the list of centres, because many of them had been rejected by us (while short-listing for mock-tests) for lack of infrastructure," says Jaideep Singh Chowdhary of TIME coaching centre, which conducted country-wide mock tests recently.

At first glance, most experts say that the blame rests squarely with the service provider for not conducting "dry-runs" of this mass-scale test. "Teething troubles will always be there, which is why mock trials are critical. Another issue could be lack of experience in India, as any software has to be accounted for and built around a set of variables," says Madan Padaki of MeritTrac.