

OK, let me just go chronologically here, maybe that will help get you an idea:

When we felt the initial tremblings around 14:30 last Friday, I was in the eSolia Tokyo office with some of my staff. I said out loud - uh oh - and thought it was just be the usual small earthquake, which we have become accustomed to. However, it kept going and growing, and things started falling off the shelves. My business partner Takumi Fukuoka and I were moving to the entrances of the floor to open doors in case we needed to evacuate, and that was when the shaking started getting so bad that it was fairly hard to stand. So we were all kind of down on one knee, shouting to each other to watch for falling glass. I think I said something like - is this the end? - while I was trying to keep the server rack from toppling, but the shaking then subsided.

We turned on the radio and heard that it was a really large quake, over 8, and off the coast but a little north, near Sendai. I remember hearing Tokyo was less than that, for instance a 7, and thinking that I was glad it was not worse. I went back to my desk to see if I could see some news about it, and I noticed a heavy glass vase had fallen down on my unibody MacBook Pro, kind of denting the keyboard, but, amazingly the computer was fine (and even more amazingly, the building, and power, and Internet line, were fine). We then heard people evacuating, and children crying from the kindergarten just below us, and decided we had better evacuate too. So we grabbed our coats and cell phones, and went out. The elevator was stopped, so we got in line and went down the stairs.

Outside everyone was there looking up at the building and we could see no structural damage. Probably an attestation to the strict building codes. Everyone was trying cell phones, but they were not working, so we could not call our families. Team eSolia waited for a while and went back in, charged our smart phones, and closed out some work and tried to decide what to do. My firm eSolia provides IT management services for multinationals here in Japan, and we were emailing and attempting to call around asking after not only our roaming staff, but our clients as well. It was a relief to hear that, our staff and their families, and our clients and their families, reported back that all were accounted for and safe. It started to become apparent, that Tokyo and Yokohama got off lightly, compared to our suffering neighbors to the north.

We were listening to the news and had heard the trains were not running, however we had a staff member who was pretty visibly shaken, so Takumi offered to drive her out to where she lives in West Tokyo. The plan was, we would swing by there, then head to Yokohama where I live. Before we left, we noticed that since Internet was working the various SNSs were fine, so there were messages going out on Twitter, Flickr, Facebook and Japanese services like Mixi. For example my wife and I were using Twitter to talk, and trying to contact our daughters via whatever means, but our older daughter is at a school where they are not supposed to have their mobile phones on during regular school hours. When I logged onto Mixi, I noticed she had posted to Mixi, saying how scary the quake was. I posted - tweet your mother! - to her there, so that got my family connected again. But we also saw a couple chilling reminders of the situation, when we saw a tweet that said - help me - in Japanese and gave a location, from someone who got trapped under a heavy fallen server rack!

We grabbed some toiletries, got some drinks and our basic essentials, and got in the car. Driving out of the city, there was simply a mass exodus of people walking their way out (but it is Japan, so no looting and no chaos), and as I like to photograph Japan, I was snapping shots here and there with my cell phone (see below URL). We were seeing lines of people walking down streets and waiting to use the green fixed-line pay phones, because cell phones were simply not working. We found out that we could indeed get online, and so we were using various SNSs to communicate with people along the way. We could understand the gravity of the situation, that way, and were able to attempt to locate hotels and find out where the biggest jams were, thanks to our iPhones.

Well our plan turned out to be a pretty weak one, because it took a few hours just to get to the JR Yamanote loop line, the train line that encircles Tokyo. We went a little further, and were observing that some subway lines had restarted service. We got close to one line that goes out to the home of the staff member who was with us, so she walked to a station of that line, and was able to go back. We turned around, but by that time it was past midnight. We were pretty hungry by then, but were thinking that there would be nothing open, but, the shops were staying open because they were doing a large amount of business from all the walkers going by. So we found a little restaurant and discussed our options.

The traffic was not moving at all, so we gave up on the dull idea of trying to make for Yokohama, 40 or 50km away, and were either going to sleep in the car, buy bikes or try to go back to the office. We did find a bike shop that was open, but as we were looking at the bikes we were also noticing the air was pretty cold, and neither my partner nor I were prepared for that. There was no way to park, and he found out that if we take a road that goes on the outside of Tokyo, we might be able to make it back to his apartment and sleep a little. The trains back to Yokohama were still not working at all, so we decided on that, and headed there. We finally got there at about 5am, and had a few hours sleep.

The next morning, I got washed up and started off at 8am, to try going back home. My wife had asked me to buy batteries, and so I went to a shop to get them and get a map just in case I would be walking back, I did the orderly Japanese thing and did not buy them all myself. I left some for others, which I might not have done before I came to Japan. Being here has got me used to the Japanese way of thinking, and working together as a group, I suppose.

At any rate, every train line I tried for was stopped, but I was able to get near Tokyo station on the Keisei line, and walked to the JR line entrance. On the way, I noticed a number of foreigners that seemed to be confused so I tried to help with interpretation or asking officials to help them. Some pregnant Korean ladies with toddlers and suitcases were busily chattering about their options, I think, and when I asked them if they spoke English they said no, but, they spoke Japanese so we could communicate. They wanted to take a taxi to a nearby station, and I recommended them to get back on the subway they had just exited, and go two stops and get out at their destination. Taxis were not a good option that day. Another couple were trying to get to the ancient capital of Kamakura, because they were on a business trip but Saturday was their day off. The trains were not even making it down there, so I had to disappoint them.

After a couple hours of waiting, I got onto the very, very crowded JR line heading for Ofuna, and got back to my home station of Totsuka. In the end it took 6 hours to get back. That night we slept in our clothes, and I heard my family huddled in the living room with the sliding glass doors to our yard open, so be able to get out in the event of a big after shock. We know after shocks are the standard, but they are no less nerve-wracking than the others.

Sunday, we all stayed home, and pretty much rested and slept. Everyone was pretty tired. My wife went food shopping and made the very smart decision to go to a small mom-and-pop shop to get things, rather than try for the big inexpensive supermarkets. My daughter and I were walking the dog, and found milk in a drug store, so we bought several 1-liter bottles. We did see considerable minor structural damage to the roads around my neighborhood in Totsuka. Any seams between concrete, around manholes, or between tar patches, had opened up a quarter- or half-inch or so.

Monday I decided to try to head up into Tokyo, for better or worse, but wanted to buy a sleeping bag and mat, just in case, so I swung by a camping goods store to do that. Usually, my commute is 90 minutes but this day it took 4 hours, due to the train stopping and waiting at every station. We managed to find a local hotel that was open, so we reserved it, and my sleeping bag remains unused.

Currently what is happening is, Yokohama is having rolling blackouts, which last a couple hours and happen a couple times a day, while Tokyo is powered. Ironically, due to the threat of radiation, which at this time the Japanese government is saying is still minor for Tokyo and Yokohama, companies in those areas are telling their employees to stay at home. We are handling support of people connecting to offices from their homes, and since Tokyo is powered we are still up here today, Wednesday. However, we have made the decision to try to work from home from tomorrow, through next Tuesday since next Monday is a national holiday. That may or may not be a good idea, since Tokyo is indeed powered, but we are monitoring the situation closely.

On top of all that, and while I hate to grouse in a situation where so many are living in absolutely devastating circumstances from the tsunami afflicted areas just north of here, I managed to get myself an ear infection. Luckily the docs are working, somehow, like the rest of us. I could get antibiotics and pain meds to deal with it, so I can keep working, and supporting our clients. The record-high pollen levels are not helping matters either, as I am sure most of Japan can attest.

To close, it is really disheartening to go into convenience stores and shops, and be able to find almost nothing on the shelves, and it is making us skittish to feel the aftershocks every hour or so, and to hear the continual reports of radiation leakage. For meals we are having better luck going to the small local restaurants, which indeed have limited supplies, but, at least can make you a hot meal. At the Royal Host (family restaurant) this AM I tried to order a cafe latte, but they were apologizing for the lack of milk. Regular supply chains have been sharply affected.

So that is where we are now.