



Have a Disaster Plan

Disasters come in different forms, and can range from a blackout to a tornado to worse. Here's how to protect your company to ensure business continuity after a catastrophic event occurs.

by Robert McGarvey



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Failing to plan for disaster may be the biggest disaster a property management firm can make. From terrorist attacks to Category 5 hurricanes, floods and fires, disasters happen every day. "The most common mistake we see is people assume it won't happen to them," says Dean Ragone, co-owner of allRisk, a Somerdale, N.J., firm specializing in commercial property restoration after disasters. "When it does, they may lose everything, including their business, because they never bothered to make simple plans,"

Know that planning starts "with the property management firm," says Ian Marlow, president of New Jersey-based Gale GFS, which oversees 60 million square feet of commercial real estate space spanning 32 countries and 49 states. Understanding disaster planning is the responsibility of every tenant but other responsibilities fall to the property management firm and, in most instances, it's the job of the property manager to outline clearly the separate spheres to tenants, Marlow suggests. "We know the local laws, for instance," adds Marlow, who indicates that different communities have varying laws involving auxiliary lighting systems, provisions for emergency water and food supplies, even fire equipment. Disaster preparation starts with the property manager knowing what's required and making sure the property lives up to its legal obligations, he says.

Don't be shy about sharing a building's disaster plan with tenants and know that savvy tenants probably will ask to see the plan. "The tenant needs to know what the property manager's plan is and what steps the tenant needs to take for themselves," says Donna Childs, CEO of New York-based Childs Capital LLC and author of *Contingency Planning and Disaster Recovery: a Small Business Guide*. Lease agreements sometimes offer details about these topics but probably the most direct way for a tenant to get informed is to ask to see the building's plans.

"Don't surprise your tenants," Childs says. "Tell them how you will collaborate with them and what they need to do themselves."

What if a disaster strikes? Marlow says that if his buildings are in the path of a hurricane, he is on the phone with pertinent sub-contractors such as janitorial firms and roofers the day before expected landfall. His agenda: reminding them he expects to see them at the property within hours of the storm's passing. "You need a plan for quickly handling any damage," Marlow says. "We prepare for the cleanup before there is any damage at all."

Put It in Writing

One lesson has emerged from the recent disasters: Plans should be written and memorized. The stressful moments after a fire, for instance, is no time to try to remember what was discussed at that disaster recovery meeting three months ago. When a plan is on paper, the steps that need to be taken are outlined clearly.

Norris Beren, executive director of the Emergency Preparedness Educational Institute in Mt. Prospect, Ill., indicates some of the essential content in a plan:

- **Assess the risks.** A company in Philadelphia might not need to worry about earthquakes, while a Chicago organization probably doesn't need a tidal wave plan. What are the realistic risks the

organization faces?

- **Determine necessary resources.** From cellphones to BlackBerries and bottled water, companies need different resources. One common need: a telephone tree that keeps current numbers (landline and wireless) for all employees and instructions about who will call whom.
- **Develop a continuity strategy.** How will you stay operational (even if at a reduced level) in the event the worst happens?

"With disasters, the planning is everything," Beren says. "Most companies find creating a plan to be a highly useful and educational business process."

How long does a workable disaster recovery plan need to be? Scott R. Gane, CPP, regional vice president for Initial Security, says that a four- to six-page document ought to do it. Stick to the essentials, don't get melodramatic and rigorously insist on options that are workable. That's key, says Gane, who stresses that "even a good plan needs to be practiced." Walk through a disaster scenario every year or so and adjust the plan accordingly.

"We run drills on a regular basis," says Deb Potter, author of *Simply Seamless Safety*. "Involve as many people, from as many departments in the organization, as you can. Different perspectives help shape a disaster plan that works. That's how companies successfully plan for disasters."

Back It Up

Don't forget your computer data—it needs its own disaster recovery plan, says Bud Stoddard, president and CEO of AmeriVault, a Waltham Mass.-based data backup company. Stoddard estimates that most big companies have in place systematic backup programs, but only a handful of small- and medium-sized enterprises do. That's a prescription for failure. Without their data, many businesses are out of business. From accounts receivables to checkbooks, most companies put their business lifeblood into data files. Unfortunately, those files are wiped out easily in a fire, flood or even an electrical outage followed by a surge. But, Stoddard says the remedy is simple. Back up your files every day, take the data out of the building and remember to test the backup occasionally (media such as tapes and CDs do go bad). Many organizations opt for automated, online back-up services that, once set up, back up all new and changed data files every night.

About 75 percent of all data loss is due to employee actions, inactions and errors, Stoddard says. Hurricane and earthquakes get the headlines. But an employee with a grudge and a little know-how can erase all the data on a company's computers with a simple command. The company that has a data disaster plan won't miss a beat. The one that lacks it just may be out of business.

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