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BUSINESS *insights*

Is Your Business Prepared for Disaster?

It's a simple question, but one that does not always have an easy answer. Disaster preparedness can take obvious forms such as smoke detectors or building evacuation routes, but what about protecting critical areas of your business — particularly communications? Communications is the lifeline to your customers, your employees, and the outside world. Any effective disaster preparedness or recovery plan must include communications as a core component.

When considering how to structure a disaster preparedness strategy, it is helpful to consider the types of emergencies your business could face. Many companies take into account a natural widespread disaster, where it may be impossible to conduct business in the entire geographical area. The good news is that in these types of cases, customer expectations may be lower in terms of the communication they expect from a company within a disaster zone. The bad news is that the company is not conducting business.

The other type of disaster is more localized, such as an office fire or flood. In this case, a business has the advantage of conducting operations from another office or temporarily relocating to a usable facility. However, in this scenario customer expectations are usually higher when they try to call or reach a business. Whatever disaster communications plan a business develops, it must be comprehensive and flexible enough to address either of these disaster scenarios.

SIP as a disaster management tool

A critical element to protecting communications viability during an emergency is SIP trunking. This technology is programmable to allow you to redirect your primary business line to phones that are still functional after a disaster event. This enables you to make use of the existing physical infrastructure of remote office locations. Let's say the corporate office of a business is in Miami, Florida, and is damaged by a hurricane. A satellite office in Atlanta, Georgia is unaffected. Inbound and outbound calls are automatically routed through the surviving network, so that there is no interruption in communications. If a business does not have any satellite offices, SIP trunking can even be programmed to route calls directly to employee cell phones.

Employee communications

Another key feature of any effective disaster plan is to develop a method for employees to receive instructions the morning of a disaster event. A conference line needs to be set up with employees instructed to call in at a specified time and every hour thereafter during the day. On the conference line, they can receive instructions on where to report, when to call-in next, how to address customer concerns, etc. Using offsite, remote-hosted "cloud" technology, this conference line can remain functional whether the disaster is local or regional in scope.

A different, but equally effective approach to maintaining employee communications is through a technology known as an Enterprise Messaging Application (EMA). Through EMA, an autodialer can send out text or pre-recorded messages to all employee cell phones. It works this way:

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During a disaster event, the disaster recovery administrator for a business logs onto a web site, and selects a pre-recorded message that goes out to all employees to give them an update of the situation, tell them where to report, etc. The administrator can also dial into the system and record a unique message that could go out to specific employees with specific instructions.

That's just what the United Space Administration did during Hurricane Katrina. This company had the very important task of tracking the Space Shuttle after each launch. When Katrina threatened both USA's Texas and Florida facilities, the organization sent out an emergency message to all 4000 employees. Each employee had a wallet-sized card with instructions to call in and enter a unique ID number. This capability resulted in specific instructions being targeted to specific employees, so each team knew where to go, and what was their current assignment.

System back-ups

The back-up of key technology is the most well-known aspect of disaster preparedness. All data systems should be backed-up at a remote location. Systems such as e-mail should be remotely hosted or mirrored so employees can access essential company data remotely and respond to customers' e-mails. Another useful strategy is to set up an e-mail blast to all of your customers to advise them of the current situation, and to let them know that you have a plan in place to keep their needs addressed.

When it comes to protecting a phone system, the battery backup is widely considered the first line of defense. The nation's phone infrastructure is protected by secondary power supplies, so if an organization has a battery backup of its own network, it is effective insurance against a power failure. But it only works if the business's physical infrastructure remains intact. In the case of flooding, fire or other damage, a company is still vulnerable.

This is why a back-up of your telephone system database and all related programming is essential. These types of back-ups should be performed weekly, if not daily. The reason is two-fold: cost and agility. If you back-up your phone system software, and your physical hardware is destroyed during a disaster, you can eliminate the need to repurchase software and minimize the time it takes to restore your system.

This overview should give you an idea of how the latest emergency preparedness technologies can protect your organization. Not every company needs the full spectrum of protection available, but every company needs to perform a risk assessment to find the right level of protection to guard business continuity and maintain the normal flow of operations. To be honest, it does take a significant amount of time and effort to develop a comprehensive disaster preparedness and recovery plan for a business. It's the primary reason many companies put off putting such as plan in place. But think about the recent hurricanes, earthquakes and floods. Of the business located within those disaster zones — particularly those that did not have a disaster plan — how many do you think are still in business?

An effective disaster management and mitigation strategy is the only way to ensure that your business stays in business well into the future.

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