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Business as usual, even after a disaster
Four steps every business should take to prepare for a disaster.
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The recent torrent of hurricanes, flooding, snowstorms and fires has encouraged many CPA firms to pull their Disaster Recovery plan off the shelf and dust it off. Or in many cases, take the initial steps to begin planning for a business interruption.

While natural disasters dominate the headlines; smaller, everyday occurrences are responsible for most business disruptions. As companies realize the risks, they also realize the importance of being prepared. Yet perceived obstacles such as high cost and substantial time commitment often discourage small and medium sized businesses and many CPA firms from taking the first step. Fortunately, there are several low cost steps that a business can take in order to prepare for an interruption.

1. Create a plan to restore communications.

Communication with your employees, vendors and clients is vital in every interruption, from a minor crisis to a regional catastrophic event. In fact, losing contact with your clients may create an opportunity for your competitors. Remember, during a large regional event, communications infrastructure may be destroyed and depending on the scenario it may be days or weeks before infrastructure is restored. What should your firm do?

- Create a phone tree including phone and email contact information of all employees and their spouses or emergency contacts.
- Create a list of clients and store it in an offsite location. Determine a process for contacting key clients should your systems go down.
- Create an emergency messaging system or a system of updates via website to stay in communication with your employees, clients and vendors.
- Use multiple means of communication, i.e. wireless, internet, text messaging, voice messaging and satellite to stay connected.
- Make sure you let your employees know ahead of time how to exchange or obtain information should standard lines of communication fail.

2. Talk to key vendors and suppliers about being prepared.

According to recent surveys, less than half of American businesses have disaster recovery or business continuity plans in place to maintain supply chain logistics in the event of a disaster. As businesses that survived the hurricane season know, supply chain planning is essential.

There are many important questions to consider: Who are your vendors, and where are they located? In today's economy, even disasters many miles from your office can directly affect your business. Are they the only source for that product or service, or are any secondary vendors available? It is prudent to communicate with your vendors and suppliers about their business continuity plans – if a key vendor is unavailable, how will it impact your business? Inform them

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of simple, low-cost steps that they too can take to prepare for any interruption. Additionally, consider how you would answer these questions, if they are posed by one of your clients.

3. Back up your data.

In today's highly technical economy, information is more valuable than ever. The best data recovery plans should call for daily back-ups at the close of the business day, with verifications every morning. Several options exist, such as tape drives, zip drives, external hard drives, online data back up, data replication and more. However you choose to back up your data, make sure that the process is automated and that you store at least one copy of your data in an off-site, secure location.

Though critical, data recovery is only one component of restoring your business operations. How will your business survive if you have data but no building to come back to?

4. Consider mobile office space for your recovery strategy.

Minor disasters can leave your office uninhabitable for days or weeks at a time. A mobile office is an important aspect of any working business resumption plan.

Though mobile recovery may seem like a complex, expensive option, over the past couple of years, mobile recovery has become more and more accessible and affordable to small and medium sized businesses. Full mobile recovery packages, including access to a mobile office, satellite phones, internet, power, furniture, computers, printers, servers and more are available at a very low monthly price point.

Historically, disaster recovery and business continuity planning was affordable only for Fortune 1000 companies. Fortunately, several factors are revolutionizing the disaster recovery industry and making it more affordable for all businesses, large or small. Your clients depend on you to be available, no matter what the scenario. The most important step you can take is to get started today.

About the author: Tom Meckley is a retired partner of Ernst & Young LLP. During his 38 year career with the Firm he served more than 15 years as an office managing partner and served as a coordinating partner for a variety of audit clients. Tom currently works with Agility Recovery Solutions, a provider of onsite mobile business continuity solutions.