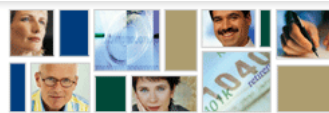




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As the Smoke Clears

FRIDAY, 27 JUNE 2008

Disaster recovery lessons learned from the Southern California wild fires.

By Lee Barken, CPA, CISSP, CISA, CCNA, MCP
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Lee Barken, information technology practice leader at Haskell & White LLP

On October 22, 2007, I witnessed the televised images of wildfires raging across San Diego County. The scale of devastation caused by the flames was beyond description. In the days that followed, we were flooded with images of homes destroyed and wide swaths of scorched earth.

When asking friends and colleagues about their homes and well-being, I also inquired about how their employers responded to the disaster and what steps were taken to keep them informed. My unscientific poll resulted in some very interesting responses. In short, some companies were well prepared while other companies were left sitting in the dark (both literally and figuratively).

One friend of mine smiled and pulled out a laminated business card from her wallet. On it was a dedicated toll free number on one side, with a list of departments and associated four digit extensions on the backside. She said that she called the number and received a general message about the company status and whether or not the office was open. After dialing a specific department code, she received another message with additional information related to her group. At all times, she was informed and could make decisions safely.

Another friend was not as lucky. The first sign of problems was that his e-mail system went down. Without e-mail access, there was no way to know which company locations were open and which were closed. A lack of information led to poor decision-making and compromised safety. Since the telephone system was integrated with the e-mail system, when he tried to check voicemail, the phone system was down as well. Although there are great advantages in Voice over IP (VoIP) telephone systems, unless preventative measures are in place, one of the downsides of these systems can be reliability.

Without access to e-mail or voice mail, this particular friend of mine was left without any kind of plan. It took three full days to get the e-mail and voice mail systems back up. I wonder what kind of economic damage was suffered by the company as a result of loss of productivity? In addition, you cannot economically measure the human toll of fear and uncertainty that was suffered by the employees.

What lessons were learned and what steps should companies be taking now in preparation for the next unexpected event?

Five Steps on the Road to Disaster Recovery Planning

1. Don't Wait for Disaster to Strike.

The last major brushfire in this area was four years ago and it may be another several years until the next one happens. Unfortunately, the nature of unpredictable events is that they are... unpredictable. As such, the next event could occur next month or even next week. The time to act is now. To start your efforts, create a project team. Be sure to include representatives from all functional areas of the business including Information Systems, Human Resources, Finance, Legal, Facilities, Operations, etc.

2. Perform a Business Impact Analysis

Ask yourself some critical questions:

- What are the mission critical functions of the business?
- What is the maximum acceptable downtime (MAD) for each function?
- What is the risk for reputational harm to the company's public image?
- How much risk can we tolerate?
- How much money are we willing to spend to mitigate these risks?

3. Write the Plan

A plan must be:

- In Writing.
- Clear and Understandable.

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- Accessible During a Crisis.

4. Communicate the Plan

A disaster recovery plan that nobody knows about is worthless. Make sure that every employee has a copy of the plan including key contact information on a business card. Ask employees to keep a copy of key information with them at all times and a copy of the full plan both at home and at work.

5. Test the Plan

Disaster recovery plans are living documents - they must be tested, analyzed and evaluated at least annually. As company sizes and conditions change, so too must the disaster recovery plans adapt.

In summary, disasters are times that tend to bring out either the best or the worst in organizations. Be sure that your company's employees are empowered to act and make decisions with employee safety and corporate impact in mind. Create, communicate and test your disaster recovery plan.

While you might be tempted to think, "it will never happen to us," consider the simple analogy of the car seatbelt. Nobody expects to get in a car crash, but we still take the time to prepare and put on our seat belt just to be safe. Not wearing your seatbelt in a car crash can have catastrophic results. Don't wait until you're in a crisis to figure out how to buckle up. Your company's survival just might depend on it.

*Lee Barken, CPA, CISSP, CISA, CCNA, MCP is the information technology practice leader at Haskell & White LLP (www.hwcpa.com). Prior to Haskell & White, he worked as an IT consultant and network security specialist for Ernst & Young's Information Technology Risk Management (ITRM) practice and KPMG's Risk and Advisory Services (RAS) practice. Lee writes and speaks on the topics of IT audit compliance, Sarbanes-Oxley, enterprise security, wireless LAN technology, and computer forensics. He is the author of *How Secure Is Your Wireless Network? Safeguarding your Wi-Fi LAN* (Prentice Hall, 2003), and *Wireless Hacking: Projects for Wi-Fi Enthusiasts* (Syngress, 2004). You can reach him at 858-350-4215 or lbarken@hwcpa.com.*

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