

Surviving the Storm

Is your business really prepared for the worst?

By Melissa Delaney

After an e-mail outage hit accounting firm Porte Brown during tax season, Jon Heller virtualized servers to improve business continuity.

THE TERM “DISASTER RECOVERY”

evokes images of devastation and destruction, but even mundane system glitches can cripple businesses. Porte Brown, an accounting firm based in Elk Grove Village, Ill., had a glimpse of disaster when its Microsoft Exchange server crashed at the height of the 2010 tax season.

Fortunately, the firm’s IT team was able to remedy the problem before suffering any long-term damage, but it wasn’t pretty, recalls Technology Support Specialist Jon Heller.

“You don’t realize how much you use an Exchange server until it goes down,” Heller says. “I have a lot less hair now than I did before this, and it’s a lot grayer.”

Despite the oft-repeated refrain about the importance of business continuity planning, many companies live with incomplete, out-of-date or inadequate plans until they face potentially devastating scenarios themselves. The lucky ones, like Porte Brown, escape virtually unscathed, with only memories of stressful close calls. But many aren’t so lucky.

Nearly three-fourths of small- and medium-size businesses report having disaster recovery plans, according to Rachel Dines, an analyst at Forrester Research. She adds, “I think the question is, are those plans robust enough?” Of the 74 percent with plans, 17 percent admit that they don’t test them, Dines says, citing the Forrester/*Disaster Recovery Journal* November 2010 Global Disaster Recovery Preparedness Online Survey.

Many plans are unexpectedly put to the test. At Porte Brown, the IT team spent a week trying to figure out what was wrong with the Exchange server before finally transferring all the data to a new server. All the while, it was fielding complaints from harried accountants working around the clock to finalize returns for their clients. “It failed; it happens,” Heller says of the server. “But it failed at the worst time in the world for our firm.”

Porte Brown, which also has an IT consulting arm, had been thinking about virtualizing its servers for some time, but it was always on the future-projects list. “When [the server crashed], it pushed us to do it,” says Heller.

Last October, the firm went live with eight virtualized servers sitting on two physical boxes. If one physical server goes down, Heller can now easily move everything to the other. He can also control the servers remotely if he can’t get into the office. “I can manage it from my iPhone if I need to,” he says.

There are costs to create a virtualized environment. But it can make disaster recovery a lot less expensive down the road, Dines points out. Having some sort of virtualized recovery system in place probably offers SMBs the most bang for the buck, she says.

60%
Virtualized environments not covered in disaster recovery plans

SOURCE: Symantec Disaster Recovery Study, November 2010

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

Kevin Herrington, CIO of Franklin Synergy Bank in Franklin, Tenn., spent some time in the military, where, he says, you learn to always have some type of backup. “I couldn’t imagine building a network without backup and disaster recovery,” he says. His bank has business-impact analysis, risk assessment and business continuity policies that are reviewed by the board of directors and tested annually.

But what if you’re a Boy Scouts dropout who isn’t wired to always be prepared? Disaster recovery/business continuity doesn’t need to be complicated. Here are the essentials:

- ✓ Create an impact analysis and risk assessment that spells out your biggest threats, what they could cost your business and which systems are critical.
- ✓ Determine your Recovery Time Objective (the time that can pass before you need to get your systems back up) and your Recovery Point Objective (how long you can tolerate data loss).
- ✓ Back up and store your data. For some, weekly backups to tape are fine. For others, real-time replication to a backup data center is necessary.
- ✓ Document and update your processes. Spell out responsibilities, communication strategies, budgeting and other administrative details.
- ✓ Test your plan regularly.