TECHNOLOGY

Planning for disaster

By Heinan Landa

Helmuth von Moltke the Elder once said, "No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy." This is as true in your office as it is on the battlefield. You may have spent months preparing your disaster-recovery plan to ensure business continuity in the face of the unexpected. You may have brought in the best consultants, used valuable internal resources for implementation, and spent significant dollars on data-recovery software. You think you are ready. But have you tested your plan?

Even the best recovery plan loses value if it is not tested on a regular basis. Don't wait until disaster strikes to find out if your recovery plan will work.

Which Disaster Scenario Do I Test?

We all want to be sure our plan for data recovery is viable in the event of a disaster, but how can you know? Take a deep breath and a step back. Then review the following scenarios from a business-benefit perspective:

1. An important file is lost. Can you restore it in a timely and effective fashion?
2. Your organization's server fails. Can it be virtualized? Replaced?
3. There is a biohazard that has made the office inaccessible. Can all employees work remotely?
4. Your office burns down. Can you function?

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5. The entire city where your office is located is struck by disaster. Are you out of business?

Industry standards suggest that you test your plan for a failed server situation twice a year and for a level-four disaster scenario (e.g., your office burns down) once a year. Understand that as test scenarios become increasingly catastrophic, the expense for simulating that scenario and the downtime required for testing will also increase. Of course, when you have a quicker way to recover from a disaster—backup systems in place, server virtualization methods, and so forth—a simulated disaster will necessitate less downtime.

Consider all related costs, including the cost of downtime, before you make the testing-level decision that is best for your organization. After this evaluation, if you find that the cost of testing is an issue, consider testing only the most common disaster scenarios: server failure and file loss.

The Testing Process

Once you've decided the disaster scenario(s) you would like to test, now what?

First, with the help of your internal IT team or external consultants, plan the disaster-recovery test with the full knowledge that it will require downtime. Then, comprehensively communicate this to all employees, members, customers, and any others who will be affected. Ensure that you have an executive-level user involved in the testing scenario so that you have someone on the "front lines" who can evaluate the test from a business-continuity perspective.

As you are conducting the test, keep a detailed log of everything that does not go as planned, as well as the solutions that worked well. This way, the test will inform revisions to your plan.

Finally, when your test is complete, review your log and incorporate any suggestions to modify your plan (and, if necessary, your technology).

Disaster-recovery-plan testing is critical, yet often overlooked. Many organizations are deterred by the expense, logistics, and required downtime. The fact is you are risking much more by assuming the plan would work.

In addition to this peace of mind, the testing process forces your organization to take a good, hard look at your disaster-recovery plan. As a result, your evolving plan becomes more effective with each test and resulting revisions. Be sure. Be safe. Know that you will be operational in the face of catastrophe.

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