Will it Work When it Matters?

By HEINAN LANDA

Helmuth von Moltke the Elder once said, "No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy."

Believe it or not, 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 unthinkable. 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, did you test your plan? After all, even the best disaster 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; proactive testing is essential for disaster recovery success.

Which Disaster Scenario Do I Test?

We all want to make sure our plan for data recovery is viable in the event of a disaster but what scenario should you test? Overwhelmed by the options (and the expense) and headaches of execution? Take a deep breath and a step back. Understand that as the test scenarios become increasingly catastrophic, the expense for simulating that scenario will also increase. Then, review the following scenarios with a business benefit perspective.

Levels of Disaster Scenarios to Consider Testing

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?
5. The worst of all possible disasters. 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 4 disaster scenario (your office burns down) once a year. Note that as the severity of the simulated disaster situation increases, the more downtime the test will require. Of course, when you have a quicker way to recover from a disaster (think: backup systems in place, server virtualization methods, etc.), the less downtime a simulated disaster will necessitate. Consider hardware and consulting costs – as well as 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 (dollars and downtime) is an issue, consider testing only the most common disaster scenarios – server failure and file loss.

The Testing Process

Ok, you've decided the disaster scenario(s) you would like to test. That means you have a detailed disaster recovery plan in place and want to make sure it is effective when the time for tests has come and gone. Now what?

1. First, with the help of external consultants and/or your internal IT team, plan the disaster recovery test with the full knowledge (and acceptance) that it will require downtime. Then, comprehensively communicate this to all employees, clients, customers, etc.
2. 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.
3. Next, 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 the plan's revisions.
4. Finally, when your test is complete, review your log and incorporate any suggestions to modify your plan (and, if necessary, your technology) so you are ready for the next test.

Last Word

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. . But, 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 revision(s). Be sure. Be safe. Know that you will be operational in the face of catastrophe.

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