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Continuity or Catastrophe: Planning for the worst and expecting the best.

"Business continuance (sometimes referred to as ***business continuity***) describes the processes and procedures an organization puts in place to ensure that essential functions can continue during and after a disaster. Business continuance planning seeks to prevent interruption of mission-critical services, and to reestablish full functioning as swiftly and smoothly as possible." (Source: techtarget.com)

This may sound simple but poor planning can lead a business straight to failure.

- "Companies that aren't able to resume operations within ten days (of a disaster hit) are not likely to survive." (Strategic Research Institute)
- "30% of all businesses that have a major fire go out of business within a year. 70% fail within five years." (Home Office Computing Magazine)

While there is no "silver bullet" that will mitigate all of the risks that a business might face, there are a number of key technology solutions that can help a business recover and insure (partial or complete) continuity from some of the worst events.

1. Is your technology well documented?
   When new technology is deployed it is often well understood and (hopefully) documented. Unfortunately, as the business and technology evolves, requirements change and employees come and go the knowledge of the systems often decreases while risks increase. Performing a regular audit of your environment and maintaining clear and accurate documentation can save you time and money at a critical moment.

2. What is your tolerance for data loss and how long can you be without your data (and systems) when you try to recover?
   Depending on the business, a five minute outage can be equally as fatal as a five day outage. The business continuity solution for each will likely be very different; both in cost and implementation. By reviewing your business requirements, tools and data you can map out a variety of possible continuity solutions that will keep you in business.

3. Do you have redundancy in your business? Are all your "eggs in one basket"?
   If your business has multiple offices / locations it may be practical to have each failover to the other in the event of a problem or failure. Replicating key business, client and financial data between two locations can ease the pain of a modest or catastrophic failure. For single location businesses a home office or hosted (Cloud) solution may offer the essential protection to insure some degree of business continuity.

4. Do you have a backup strategy? Do you test it regularly?

Backups are probably the most significant component of any business continuity planning and very often the most overlooked. It's been reported that more than 50% of small businesses do not perform a regularly scheduled back of their office computers and of those that do, 85% never test their backups to insure that they will work when they need them.

This is clearly an area where one size does NOT fit all. The right solution should be based on many of the issues discussed here. It is vital to design and implement a solution that minimizes the impact to your business, employees and clients, keeping in mind to:

- Backup key and business critical files (e.g. financial data, contracts, etc.) frequently, keeping multiple versions. In the event that your technology is infected with malware and you don't detect it right away, you can try again.
- Create a backup schedule, rotate your backup media and take them offsite regularly.
- Keep your software installation disks and software keys in a safe place, offsite if appropriate.
- Create periodic backup "images" of key systems (servers and workstations), including the operating system and applications. This can speed the recovery process in the event of an equipment failure.
- While onsite / local backup devices are less expensive and typically faster to recover from, maintenance and support of these devices (e.g. changing and rotating them offsite) can be a challenge. An online backup service is also an excellent way to copy key and business critical files offsite, backed up safely and securely.
- Test your backups! Just because you have implemented a backup plan, don't assume that it is (always) working. Test your backups regularly by restoring some or all of your data to the same or alternate equipment, making sure that you can get your data back when you really need it.

For more information see: "Backups, Backups, Backups!" – http://jefric.com/blog/2011/01/05/backups-backups-backups/

You should test your newly created business continuity plan regularly; on scheduled intervals, as recommended or mandated by regulatory organizations or your business leaders. Conducting a regular business day or week of work using your business continuity plan will help make sure it works when you don't need it will ease the pain for you when you do.

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