

*A Special Report*

## When Disaster Strikes

Plan for emergencies and keep the office running.



BY DON ROUTHIER

**N**atural disasters, mandatory evacuations, commercial power outages, and terrorist threats are just a few of the events that can wreak havoc on your law practice. In such circumstances, staff cannot be expected to leave home and show up at your building to work. Yet your clients continue to require immediate attention and expect excellent service.

Recent events in New Orleans point to the necessity of having a disaster-recovery plan in place so that your law firm can continue to function in an emergency—any emergency—especially if your building becomes inaccessible. A critical component of your disaster-recovery plan should address how your firm will maintain its communications services so that staff can continue to serve clients.

Disruptions to voice, data, and Internet technologies will hamper your firm's ability to stay in touch with clients and to provide essential services. While long-term planning is essential for any organization, there are steps you can take right now to maintain your firm's communications under the worst of circumstances.

### TELEWORK PROGRAM

Telework, also known as telecommuting, is an arrangement that allows staff to work out of their homes at least part of the time. Such programs are usually seen as a way to help cut down on traffic congestion and boost productivity. They can also be used to attract and retain qualified staff. But the inherent decentralization of the work force provided by a telework program will also help your firm maintain services if a crisis makes your office inaccessible.

All that is required for a home office are a computer and broadband Internet access connection, such as DSL or cable. A telework application added to the computer gives each person full access to the firm's internal network via a secure virtual pri-

vate network (VPN) connection. This connection can even be used to securely access the office phone system, e-mail system, file system, and conferencing system.

When you set up a telework program, you'll get immediate productivity and efficiency benefits. With staff able to work out of their homes and access all office functions, you'll also have effective disaster protection already in place if your building becomes inaccessible.

### VOICE COMMUNICATION

Your local telephone company offers affordable options that help ensure voice service. They can be arranged with just a phone call.

- Advanced (or ultra) call forwarding allows you to control the rerouting of incoming calls to a backup location in case of an outage. You can dial in to set it up from anywhere. This is much better than basic call forwarding, which must be programmed from the office line itself—which doesn't help if you can't get into your building.

- Redirect service is like a forwarding service but with some extra bells and whistles. It not only enables you to redirect incoming calls to other locations but allows you to redirect calls to multiple locations based on preferences such as where the call originates from or even what day or time the call is made.

- Alternate serving wire center equips your building with dial tone from two different telephone company exchanges (central offices). If one exchange gets knocked out of service, phone calls are handled by the other exchange. Your local carrier can help you determine if this option is available at your location.

### INTERNET ACCESS PROTECTION

With the Internet now essential to every law firm, it makes sense to protect this resource against any service disruption. One way to do this is to have your Internet equipment (router) set up to perform "load balancing."

Load balancing allows Internet traffic to be handled by two Internet service providers (ISPs) over two separate paths. If one of the links goes down due to an ISP equipment failure or a cut line—for instance, during a construction dig—the other link takes all of your traffic to the other ISP. No matter how satisfied you are with your current ISP, you should consider adding another one as a hedge against disaster.

There is also a security aspect to protecting your Internet-access connections. Many service providers offer managed security services that include anti-virus, firewall, anti-spyware, and pop-up-ad blockers. With managed security services, the provider takes responsibility for keeping your firm's network secure.

### PROTECTING DATA NETWORKS

Larger, multilocation practices that rely on advanced data networks should look into the following options to ensure mission-critical processes will continue without interruption during emergency situations.

- **VPN backup:** A virtual private network (VPN) offers a cost-effective solution to backing up private lines or high-speed data services. If your private line or data service fails, your traffic can be automatically rerouted to a VPN. The VPN offers a secure way to transport your data across the Internet using encryption.

- **Dual fiber rings:** Many buildings are served by dual optical fiber rings from the phone company. The rings safeguard data traffic through a built-in protection capability. When your data is blocked by a fiber cut or an equipment failure, transmission is simply rerouted in the opposite direction over the other fiber. The handoff happens so fast that you will not even be aware that a problem occurred.

- **Dual entrance facilities:** Many buildings on fiber rings also have separate entrances for telecommunications lines, allowing access to the equipment room from two directions. This “path diversity” can further protect your location against a total network outage.

A local service provider can offer more information on the network connections serving your building and all of the protection mechanisms that are available.

### BUSINESS CONTINUITY CENTER

A business continuity center, actually a temporary office location, allows you to quickly relocate your practice in the event your building becomes damaged or inaccessible due to a local disaster.

The alternate work environment can be available on a subscription basis, so it is always there when your firm needs it. This service allows your key employees to carry on essential client services for the duration of the emergency.

Beyond furnished offices and fully equipped cubicles, the factors to consider when selecting this type of business continuity service include the following:

- Is there a data center, and can it be configured to support your business applications?
- Is Internet bandwidth available, and how fast can it be activated?
- Is there a network operations center with technicians who are ready to address any request or outage around the clock?
- Are the PCs equipped with the latest operating systems and software?
- Are a receptionist and an automated attendant service available?
- Does the center accommodate extended hours for your staff?
- What level of customization is possible to meet the needs of your practice?

These preventive measures are like life insurance—you invest in them wishing they never have to be used. Ultimately, your ability to continue providing client services during a prolonged emergency rests on your decision to take steps now to safeguard your voice services, data network, and Internet access.

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